벨노르피아

아카데미 장애인 전형 생도가 되었다

두두두우

판타지 장편소설

I BECAME THE ACADEMY'S DISABLED STUDENT

– 아카데미 장애인 전형 생도가 되었다 –

- VOLUME 2 -

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[GALAXYTL]

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CHAPTER 52
ALWAYS BE CAREFUL WITH FIRE (1)

Monster names are typically bestowed by the first person or group to discover them, and they often contain intuitive meanings.

– Screeeeeech!

A noise that was grating to the ears made my face involuntarily grimace.

Do moths even make such a sound? Not that I know of, at least.

But then, monsters in this other world could be biologically and magically different, making such a noise possible.

Parasitic Moth.

It's a monster I've encountered in the original work.

The keywords from its name are 'parasitic' and 'moth'.

I sensed the shape of the Parasitic Moth flying in the sky using my other senses.

Its three pairs of wings fluttered endlessly, scattering the wind while its proboscis emitted a loud noise.

The sheer intensity of its magical aura.

'…Ugh.'

My stomach churned. The force of the mana was more tremendous than I had imagined. My legs quivered. If I had to fight such a creature in reality, I'd surely be backing away by now.

The only reason I was slightly less scared was that this place wasn't real—it was inside the Tower.

– Whoosh!

“Argh! Damn it!”

Below the Parasitic Moth, a more intense blaze surged, and that—at least for now—was on our side(?).

This region was completely dead. The devastation bore a stark similarity to what we had passed earlier.

The difference was, while the previous place bore signs of everything burnt to ashes, here, life and mana seemed to have been sucked dry, leaving everything lifeless.

Parasitic Moth.

It was given such a name due to its ability to absorb mana. Absorbing vast amounts of life force and mana from its surroundings is a racial skill of its kind.

Being an alpha specimen, it would certainly be more powerful.

– Squeeeee!

The Parasitic Moth emitted a different kind of noise than before. Mana around it writhed and was sucked toward the creature.

The mana coursed through the Parasitic Moth’s body and converged in its proboscis. Hong Yeon-hwa stomped the ground, a clear prelude to something ominous.

– Boom!

A burst followed. A simple, brutish column of mana struck down from the sky.

Such an attack, condensing mana and firing it in a straight line, was typical for monsters inherently endowed with enormous mana reserves.

The Parasitic Moth swept its proboscis around. Lines of mana scorched the earth, trailing after Hong Yeon-hwa.

– Whoosh

Hong Yeon-hwa stomped the ground once more. Her form flickered like flames.

Even in a world of darkness, Hong Yeon-hwa blazed red.

This was due to her fire attribute mana and Qi, influenced by her nature as Gop-hwa.

With each roll of her legs, the ground shattered. Ejected fragments were erased by the pillars of mana and consumed by Gop-hwa, not leaving a single ash behind.

Despite greedily absorbing mana, the Parasitic Moth's attacks never so much as grazed Hong Yeon-hwa.

– Crash!

Dodging the onslaught, Hong Yeon-hwa executed a sharp turn. Accompanied by a thunderous noise, she accelerated her momentum.

Pulling an arm back, she assumed a stance akin to hurling a javelin.

Magical energy billowed and condensed in her grasp. It soon transformed into a lengthy spear of flames.

"Die!"

With a throw, the spear shot from the ground to the sky, unlike the downward-struck mana beams.

– Screeeeeech!

The Parasitic Moth halted its attack and desperately twisted its body. Despite its large size, its movements were swift.

The spear of flames pierced through where the moth's wings had been just a moment before, shooting into the sky, where it exploded.

"Ah, damn it! That freaking insect!"

Hong Yeon-hwa scowled, her displeasure evident. She took a moment to catch her breath and then turned around.

“I’m going to roast that thing with a direct flame… Hey… um…”

Amplified touch can finely detect even the perception of a gaze. Hong Yeon-hwa’s eyes locked onto mine.

Her gaze trembled slightly. It was an expression tinged with both awkwardness and color, scanning my face and body before drifting away.

As her gaze turned, I assumed it had landed on Elia and Baek Ahrin as well.

Elia showed no particular response.

At most, a hint of welcome lingered in her gaze. It seems Elia’s affability had reached even Hong Yeon-hwa.

Then her gaze turned to Baek Ahrin.

“…Hello?”

Baek Ahrin offered an awkward smile and waved her hand.

Whoosh! Gop-hwa’s intensity escalated. Anger rose palpably.

The fury fed the Gop-hwa’s flames. A quivering blade of fire formed behind Hong Yeon-hwa, ready to launch at any moment.

“Aaah! Hayul, save me!”

Baek Ahrin shrieked and leaped back, heading straight behind me.

– Sorry, but take my place.

‘Gyah!’

Reluctantly giving my back to Baek Ahrin was discomforting. I too jumped back, finding myself behind Baek Ahrin.

We circled around Elia like a game of tag, endlessly chasing one another.

Hong Yeon-hwa clenched her teeth. The blade of fire that had formed behind her

trembled before dissolving into thin air.

“Fuuuu…!… damn.”

“Filtered to ‘damn’…? How bad must the unfiltered curse have been to come to that…?”

Baek Ahrin muttered in astonishment, having ceased her circling. I too, barely managed to stop.

“Cursing? Hey! It’s because you spout such bullshit… you get cursed!”

“Maybe it’s a problem that you, Yeon-hwa, jump without hearing everything out…”

They naturally bickered with each other. It was a common sight. I calmed my pounding heart and raised my senses.

– Screeeeeech

The Parasitic Moth continued to hover in the sky, eyeing us keenly, especially Hong Yeon-hwa.

‘Gop-hwa?’

Upon closer sensation, something was off about the moth’s left wing. Its internal mana was frayed as if burnt by fire, likely a run-in with Gop-hwa.

It must not have been a direct hit. Otherwise, it wouldn’t be flying so effortlessly.

“Hayul!”

Following Baek Ahrin’s short scream, the warmly welcoming voice of Hong Yeon-hwa approached me abruptly.

I felt a similar warmth. It had only been a few days, but I missed seeing Hong Yeon-hwa.

However, the situation wasn’t favorable. Suppressing my gladness, I waved my hands and pointed to the sky.

Understanding my intention, Hong Yeon-hwa nodded and filled me in.

Baek Ahrin's bluff had sent Hong Yeon-hwa crashing into a crowd of cadets, resulting in her rampant outburst. In the process, some were disqualified, and others fled, saving their "lives".

I had been assumed disqualified since I was out of sight, causing a brief moment of gloom.

We found a suitable spot nearby to rest and spend the day. Precisely speaking, just before, Hong Yeon-hwa had sensed the presence of the boss.

And thus, the brawl unfolded.

"I embedded Gop-hwa into its left wing, but it was a bit off, not causing a fatal wound. Its flying capability is somewhat reduced."

"What about the other cadets? With all this noise, they would've gathered by now."

"Not long after we started fighting, so no one else has shown up yet. I've made such a ruckus that the ones nearby ran off. But if the noise continues, more will come."

Hong Yeon-hwa smacked her lips and swung her sword.

"Right now, it's flying about, so subduing it is difficult. Getting close to strike is a hassle, and shooting mana from the ground is hard to hit."

Flying monsters are especially challenging to subdue. That's why flight is highly valued when categorizing monster tiers.

A flying tier 5 alpha specimen? If that were released into the world, even upper superhumans would struggle to catch it.

The explanation was brief. While conversing, I turned away from Hong Yeon-hwa, who remained vigilant of the Parasitic Moth.

Facing me was Baek Ahrin, who seemed immersed in thought.

As far as I knew, Baek Ahrin was the most adept at strategy and tactics here. Expecting she might have a plan, I looked her way.

"…How about this?"

True to the expectation, Baek Ahrin's lips parted with a suggestion.

.

.

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And then, I held a bow.

'……'

It was a bow that once belonged to an unnamed cadet, now reduced to ash. Although labeled as a standard issue, it boasted excellent performance, thanks to its origin from Shio-ram.

I toyed with the bow absentmindedly before turning my senses away.

In the distance, Baek Ahrin zigzagged on the ground, firing ice spears into the sky. Occasionally, she leaped high, using blocks of ice as platforms to aim directly at the flying Parasitic Moth.

The moth fluttered its three pairs of wings frantically to evade. The flow of wind wrapping around its wings seemed aberrant, suggesting it possessed wind attribute abilities.

Though it was hit by a few attacks, the moth, befitting its tier, showed little damage to such restraint-based assaults. Baek Ahrin created distance and kept peppering it with minor strikes.

I recalled the plan we had just heard.

– The plan is simple! With Elia's buff, Ahrin and I will distract the moth, creating an opening for Yeon-hwa to finish it off with a maximum output of Gop-hwa!

It was a straightforward strategy. I had remained calm, but Baek Ahrin had looked at me, adding further explanation.

– It’s unavoidable. Yeon-hwa might have wiped out the surrounding cadets, but we don’t know when others might swarm in.

– Not wiped out, disqualified, you damn… girl.

– Exclamation!

‘…A bow.’

I had never used a bow. Though I was training with Professor Atra in combat, I had only learned swordplay, punching, and kicking—I had yet to handle firearms or bows in practice.

Actually, my image of bows was somewhat negative. From my past life, I couldn’t fathom why anyone would use a bow over a gun.

Of course, if I get into that debate, then it falls into the dilemma of why not just use a gun instead of swords or spears.

Frankly, Hong Yeon-hwa could flick away incoming bullets with her fingertips, so whether it’s a gun or a bow, the user is what matters most.

‘Huff… ’

With a deep breath, I aimed the bow calmly. My target was the Parasitic Moth, flying about in a frenzy.

No need to be nervous.

The goal was to catch the moth’s attention.

It didn’t have to be a lethal hit. Just create a brief opening for Hong Yeon-hwa to strike.

I gripped the bow and carefully assumed my stance. Though it was the first time handling it, I naturally took a proper posture.

‘Jack-of-all-trades.’

A unique ability that grants a minimum level of aptitude and skill enhancement in

various fields.

Since it falls under the category of combat, I should be able to manage it to some extent. Moreover, I knew how to use it in theory.

I grabbed the bowstring with my right hand.

Pulling back the mana-made bowstring, it made a surprisingly convincing sound as it grazed my ears.

The bow's integrated principles manifested, and an arrow made of mana formed on the string.

[Mana Arrow Implementation]

A basic function included in most standard-issue bows.

Normally, you imbue a real arrow with mana and shoot it, but when you run out, you can shoot an arrow made entirely of mana.

I drew mana inward. Tapping the core, I extracted mana and guided it to the bowstring. The mana rushed obediently at the command of its owner.

The pulled bowstring gathered mana, shaping it into an arrow.

'…[Flame Imbue].'

Whoosh! The mana arrow was enveloped in flames.

A low-tier attribute-imbuing spell. The attribute imbued was that of flame.

To a living creature, fire is naturally a dangerous element, except for some unusual or special kinds like golems.

Parasitic Moth. Despite its appearance, it's essentially an insect, not made up of elements like stone, wind, or water.

A flame surging with mana should grab its attention well enough.

Creak… I pulled the bowstring to its limit. The Jack-of-all-trades supported my

stance, and mana affinity tuned the imbued attribute spell.

To attract attention, it must seem 'dangerous if hit'. I poured more mana into it. The flames sticking to the arrow grew fiercer.

– Whoom!

The fire blazed, fueled by the mana of high purity. The bow in my hands felt heavy, as if it could somehow weigh down the powerful mana-filled arrow.

'This should be enough… '

It seemed likely to succeed.

Just as I was about to signal Hong Yeon-hwa, Baek Ahrin, and Elia, waiting for the right moment, I felt their appalled gazes on me.

– Whoosh!

Flames erupted from my right hand, wrapped in an arm cover. The fire on the arrow was so fierce it paled the surrounding blaze.

I stood there, mouth agape.

'No.'

Why is this happening again?

CHAPTER 53
ALWAYS BE CAREFUL WITH FIRE (2)

The world I originally came from was a place of half-hearted struggles.

Had I become so disabled that I couldn't move, I might have given up, but I was healthy enough to move around, albeit with difficulty.

Had I been utterly heartless, I would have remained indifferent to whether others lived or died, but instead, I meddled and ended up crippling my legs.

– Whoosh

It's the same in this world.

Without any regrets, I could have just cursed and died, but I've been left clinging to half-hearted remnants of life, crawling around pathetically.

It's tough. I hate getting up early every day to exercise, cramming my head with all sorts of strange knowledge.

Swinging a weapon until my palms tear and my nails break during sparring, feet pounding the ground until they're battered and blistered.

Trudging back for solitary practice, struggling to catch up with academic studies I've fallen behind on, and collapsing from exhaustion into nightmares.

I loathe it all.

– Whoosh…!

I hate everything.

The curse of an early death. I don't even know when I'll die. By looking at cases and descriptions of NPCs with similar curses, I can only guess it's about ten years or so.

As the term ‘short-lived’ implies, it wouldn’t be strange to drop dead any day now. It’s frightening. I hate feeling this fear.

I want to taste real flavors again. I want to smell vanilla scents that I’d seek out in times of stress.

I want to see the world with my own eyes, not just spatial information. I want to gaze upon the sky that I can no longer see.

I hate feeling as if my throat is being ripped apart by the slightest mistake.

It’s unjust. Why do I have to suffer like this? What did I do wrong? I’ve always tried not to be a burden to others.

Was I really in the wrong, as those bastards said? Was I not meant to be born at all? Was I nothing but a harmful entity that caused trouble for others?

I…

– Whoosh!

The sound of something burning. Combustion. Emotions being consumed like firewood, amplified to replenish them.

A bizarre yet familiar piece of knowledge came to mind, and suddenly I snapped to attention.

‘Why… No, no! What the hell. Focus.’

What was I just thinking?

As I became conscious of my pitiful whining, my sagging spirit tightened.

I shook off the clinging, heavy emotions as if emerging from a swamp. Suddenly, I became aware of my surroundings.

Something was burning right beside me. No, it was my arm that was ablaze.

My entire right arm, drawing the bowstring, was engulfed in flames. It was a fire infused with mana so potent, it was unmistakable.

‘What is this?’

Flames burst from my arm. An unforeseen phenomenon.

Inside the Tower, pain is minimized to a mere sting, even if you’re cut by a knife.

‘Hot…!’

But it’s hot. The most intense sensation I’ve felt since entering the Tower. The fierceness of the flame grew. If this continued, my arm might be engulfed entirely.

Fortunately, I hadn’t sustained significant damage yet. But considering the escalating intensity of the blaze, I could be harmed if I left it unchecked.

– It’s unfair. Why do I have to go through this here?

‘Ugh… ’

My thoughts wavered for a moment. Swollen emotions unsteadied my rational judgment.

My arm trembled. It felt like I had lost consciousness for a second, but luckily it was only for a few moments.

In the sky, the Parasitic Moth continued to fly, with Baek Ahrin distracting it.

A little away, Elia and Hong Yeon-hwa were watching for their moment.

Everyone was sending shocked looks my way. Especially Hong Yeon-hwa, whose reaction was extreme, as if the world was crumbling before her eyes.

I couldn’t understand why. But standing idle, lost in confusion, was the worst thing I could do.

Even now, the violent flames persisted.

The spell that amplifies the owner’s emotions, a fire that feeds on emotions.

Hong Yeon-hwa’s unusually intense reaction.

They all brought a certain flame to mind.

For now, I'll put aside my questions. Later…

…Later, I'll find out? Have I ever resolved any of the doubts I have?

– Whoosh

Surviving the daily beatings from my parents with my frail young body.

Staying alive even when my stomach was slashed open.

Surviving a fire that swept away my parents, leaving only me alive.

Living through years on the street without a proper meal.

The miraculous recovery of my crippled legs.

Being dragged into this world.

The rampage of spatial perception, the identity of the void witnessed in the Gate, the Principal's suspected motives for bringing me here, an impending calamity event.

Have I figured out anything? And could I even if I wanted to? Am I capable of coping?

'I need… to shoot.'

I gritted my teeth. Emotions intensified. Along with them, the flames grew more violent.

This is not a normal emotional state. Repeating that to myself, I aimed the bow at the Parasitic Moth.

I don't know why my arm is acting out, but for now, I'll shoot first, think later.

I narrowed my thoughts. Folding all the excessive considerations and focusing on one thing.

– Whoosh!

More than the enchanted magic on the arrow, my mind was drawn to the wild flames flickering from my arm.

Suddenly, a thought flashed through my mind.

The roaring flames that wrapped around my arm. I didn't know the origin, but they were flames of my own mana, burning through the ambient mana.

If that was the case, perhaps I also had control over them.

I tried to tame the flames.

Whoosh! The fire flared up more violently than before, like a creature rearing its head in defiance.

But that lasted only a moment; gradually, it lowered its crest and moved onto the arrowhead at my command.

Looking back at the previous arrow, even by my own judgment, it was threatening. It needed just one shot, after all, as I had packed it with mana.

Now…

– Whoosh!

It appeared to be the strongest attack I had ever launched.

I released the bowstring, taut to the point of snapping.

From the ground to the sky, a crimson line was drawn. The arrow split the air, creating a turbulent wind that brushed against my skin.

Fast.

I could sense the desperation in the Parasitic Moth's wingbeats. The flow of the wind became chaotic.

I hit it. That was the first thought.

– Boom!

The explosion followed immediately.

* * *

My vision was a blur. I doubted the world I was seeing with my own eyes.

I wished it was a lie, just a dream.

Waking from a nightmare, I would've kicked off the covers and risen, perhaps fuming for a moment, but then sighing in relief.

I hoped it was all a dream. But her senses, her intuition, told her this was reality.

'Ugh… '

A splitting headache washed over her. Hong Yeon-hwa gasped for breath. Blood seeped from her clenched fist.

Beyond that, I saw an arm wrapped in flames and an arrow with a malevolent aura. The fired arrow pierced the air at a speed that even shocked her.

– Boom!

The arrow that struck the Parasitic Moth caused a colossal explosion of flames. The creature's screams echoed in all directions.

Then a gale whipped up, flapping Hong Yeon-hwa's clothes violently. Dirt mounds amassed from the battle's aftermath scattered in all directions.

Flame. It was familiar to her. Her clan's symbol was fire, and the innate abilities that followed were also of fire.

But that flame… the flame arising from the scars left by her clan…

It felt almost personal to her.

That realization gnawed at Hong Yeon-hwa's heart.

"Hong Yeon-hwa!"

A familiar voice. Baek Ahrin's shout turned Hong Yeon-hwa's head.

"First! Hunt down the boss!"

She spoke only the essentials. Hong Yeon-hwa stuttered for a moment, then bit her lip hard.

It made sense. That… the boss should be dealt with first before any questions.

– Whoosh!

The flames surged again. The fire that always blossomed at her will. The Gop-hwa, tainted with unpleasant emotions, emerged deeper than before.

Bang! Her legs, wrapped in Gop-hwa, stomped the ground. The landscape receded, and she launched herself skyward with all her might.

– Screeeeeech…!

As the aftermath of the explosion settled, the body of the Parasitic Moth was revealed.

The moth, wobbling precariously, tilted to one side. Its left wing, struck by the arrow, was completely shredded, rendering it unable to maintain flight.

Hong Yeon-hwa had planned to create an opportunity with Baek Ahrin, but she hadn't expected to provide such a critical chance.

Feeling the approach of death, the Parasitic Moth frantically tried to distance itself from Hong Yeon-hwa, but she was already within striking distance.

Her eyes, bloodshot, glared at the Parasitic Moth.

Right now, Hong Yeon-hwa was incredibly angry. It was an understatement. She seemed ready to burst at any moment.

Gop-hwa feeds best on the owner's emotions. Therefore, users of Gop-hwa must know how to exploit their emotions.

A whirlpool of thoughts swirled in her mind. She channeled them into a single

outcome.

All the emotions, all the irritation, stemmed from that damn monster.

She could be accused of shirking responsibility, but she reasoned simply. By doing so, she efficiently fueled her emotions.

'Not yet.'

Tier 5. She had managed to hunt one alone before, but it lacked something. She lacked the certainty that it could be killed.

Even if it could be killed, she didn't want to let it off easily.

A distinct uniqueness that sets it apart from other beings. A right to assert one's uniqueness in a world permeated with special abilities.

That is what a unique ability is.

The Gop-hwa—flames that burn oneself and the world, leaving nothing of what is hated but ashes.

It feeds on mana and life force, turning everything into kindling, but especially thrives on burning emotions. To do so, it amplifies the owner's emotions.

Gop-hwa is a unique ability that is difficult to categorize.

It manifests as a fire attribute, an enhancement within the body, and it also brings several advantages to combat.

Being unique.

Different from all else.

But being unique is not enough. Both the first superhumans and those living in this moment would agree.

Being unique now doesn't guarantee being special and unique in the future.

To stand still while everyone moves forward is akin to regressing.

Thus, one must progress. Not to rest on the present, but to expand on uniqueness.

Hong Yeon-hwa approached the Parasitic Moth. An ideal opportunity since the surprise attack. She discarded her sword and reached out her hand.

Gop-hwa entangled around her grasp like threads.

'Expansion Ability.'

[Open Fire].

Whoosh. The flame in her hand extinguished. The violent flames that had been writhing around her body also vanished without a trace.

The additional surge in physical abilities that came with Gop-hwa also disappeared.

Instead…

– Whoosh!

A different, more intense flame burst forth from her hand than ever before.

Selection and focus.

Discarding the trivial and concentrating solely on output.

"Die."

– Boom!!

A deep red hue covered the sky. Intense heat radiated in all directions.

The moth's body, engulfed directly by the flames, cast an ephemeral shadow.

But like a torch in a storm, the shadow flickered precariously—unable to even utter a proper death cry—it vanished into oblivion.

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Hong Yeon-hwa, having poured Gop-hwa to the last, landed on the ground.

The land, which had been somewhat intact, was now melting and scorched—a complete mess.

She had tried to control it, deliberately unleashing the flames upward to minimize the impact on the ground.

Nevertheless, that didn't squelch her concerns. Hong Yeon-hwa quickly scanned her surroundings.

A semi-spherical ice structure caught her eye a short distance away. It was Baek Ahrin's defense against the blast's aftermath.

Hong Yeon-hwa ran toward it with glee.

As she approached, the ice split open. Inside were Baek Ahrin, Elia, and Lee Hayul.

"Hayul…!"

Hong Yeon-hwa's face was filled with worry. Lee Hayul looked incredibly distressed.

His breath was ragged, his face flushed red. His body wobbled weakly from side to side as if he might collapse at any moment.

Pushing past Baek Ahrin and Elia, Hong Yeon-hwa rushed to Lee Hayul's side.

"Hayul! Are you okay?! What to do… Ah, right! Healing! Ahrin! Heal—no, before that! Your arm! Hayul, show me your arm!"

Hong Yeon-hwa flustered, waving her hands. She was dizzy from recently using a significant amount of mana.

"?"

Lee Hayul tilted his head in confusion. After several moments of puzzlement, he extended his arm forward.

– Light touch

"…Huh?"

A sense of fullfillment filled her. Hong Yeon-hwa let out a dumbfounded exclamation. Then an arm wrapped around her waist.

Her eyes, quaking as if struck by an earthquake, looked down.

She saw Lee Hayul nestled comfortably in her embrace.

"Huh…?"

Her train of thought abruptly cut off. However, strangely, her mind rapidly analyzed the current situation.

For some reason, flames reminiscent of Gop-hwa, the same—or rather, exactly Gop-hwa—erupted from Lee Hayul's arm.

Gop-hwa, a unique ability.

A feature that fiercely combusts, feeding off emotions, which can also become a weakness or strength.

Stirring emotions…

After completing her chain of thoughts, Hong Yeon-hwa's gaze swept over Lee Hayul's face.

His cheeks flushed with heat, his breath rugged, a faint moan escaping his lips…

His expression mirrored the one from before, but now, comfortably held in her arms, he seemed more relaxed.

After grasping the situation, alongside her concern, another emotion sprang forth.

"…Gulp."

Hong Yeon-hwa swallowed.

CHAPTER 54
ALWAYS BE CAREFUL WITH FIRE (3)

Three days into the tower.

Already half of the schedule had whizzed by, and what could be called the final assignment—a boss—was discovered and subdued within a few hours of its appearance.

Effectively, the main event was over.

As the end of the tower entry approached, competition among the cadets intensified.

Hong Yeon-hwa and her companions had moved away with a staggering Lee Hayul in tow.

They had all spent a considerable amount of physical and magical energy capturing the boss.

Baek Ahrin, who had taken an active offense to draw the boss's attention, and Elia, who bestowed all sorts of enhancement spells and buffs on the warriors for a powerful strike.

And Hong Yeon-hwa, who had pushed the output of her sparingly used Gop-hwa to the maximum and even employed her expansion ability.

Facing cadets lured by the commotion would have been too much.

A dugout in the ground created some distance. Baek Ahrin had hastily put up a temporary base using various spells.

Building temporary bases or trenches is occasionally required knowledge in dungeons or on the front lines, so it's proudly included in the Shio-ram curriculum.

Some time had passed since they hid to recover their strength.

Inside, with only a small hold for a bit of sunlight,

the group sat in a triangle around a centrally placed light spell…

There were four of them, but they sat in a triangle.

Diagonally to the left of Hong Yeon-hwa was Baek Ahrin, and to the right was Elia. Both their gazes were fixed this way.

A lingering awkward atmosphere and hesitant looks. Curiosity was evident, but they seemed unable to ask.

Hong Yeon-hwa carefully shifted her posture.

– Squeeze

“Hik…!”

The breath tickling her nape intensified. Hong Yeon-hwa’s eyelashes fluttered.

The one nestled in her embrace squirmed and burrowed further inside. The warmth became more pronounced.

Hong Yeon-hwa glanced down at her bosom. There lay Lee Hayul, pressing one cheek against her chest, eyes tightly shut.

‘Ugh… ’

A grip on her heart and a vigorous shake forced her eyes to close tight.

People often described Hong Yeon-hwa’s personality as hasty and fiery. To some extent, it was true.

She was someone who would rather throw a punch than talk things through.

But what most didn’t know was that her current level of control was the result of barely managing her nature.

The output of Hong Yeon-hwa’s Gop-hwa was unprecedented in her family’s history, and the emotional intensity that came with it was the highest ever.

Even as a child, she was far from calm, and after manifesting Gop-hwa at an early age, it only got worse.

That's why she had been rigorously trained in managing Gop-hwa and her emotions from a young age.

In other words, despite her actions, Hong Yeon-hwa was a person with strong patience.

And now, she was testing the limits of that patience in real-time.

She suppressed a rising impulse and gently patted Lee Hayul's back with the hand cradling him.

"It's okay, we're not going anywhere…"

Usually shy, now he was burrowing into her embrace and whining.

There was a speculation. That's why she was calmly offering her embrace and comforting him like this.

Whispers of reassurance in his ear calmed the squirming. The pats continued, and the strained breathing eased into a steady rhythm.

Hong Yeon-hwa, tense, let out a sigh of relief and continued to stroke Lee Hayul's back gently.

Feeling a gaze, she looked up tentatively. Baek Ahrin was watching with a very complex expression.

"It's just so awkward with you doing that, Hong Yeon-hwa."

"What's awkward?"

"That's not the violent Hong Yeon-hwa I know…"

Baek Ahrin's exaggerated response furrowed Hong Yeon-hwa's brow. She knew it was just idle chatter before getting to the point.

Baek Ahrin's family, the Changhae, had a deep relationship with the Gop-hwa clan.

As the Changhae heir, Baek Ahrin had often met with members of the Gop-hwa clan and had been exposed to their unique abilities.

Therefore, she could not be ignorant of the flames that emerged from Lee Hayul.

In the first place, it would be hard to find a superhuman who didn't know of the unique ability known as Gop-hwa.

Elia had slipped away for a while. Judging by the presence felt above, she had given them space for the moment.

Baek Ahrin hesitated uncharacteristically, rolling her eyes before speaking up softly.

"Is Lee Hayul from the Gop-hwa clan?"

"I don't know."

"Huh?"

"I said I don't know."

Hong Yeon-hwa replied brusquely, easily dismissing the inquiring gaze.

But her feelings grew more complicated.

The Gop-hwa clan had been established over 200 years ago.

The bloodline of the clan's progenitor, Hong Yeon, had been passed down, along with the unique ability of Gop-hwa.

While there had been changes over the generations, just as people's natures differ, the fundamental basis of Gop-hwa remained unaltered.

Not all descendants of the progenitor manifested Gop-hwa.

There were those who didn't awaken to mana, those who didn't manifest any unique abilities, and those who had ordinary fire attributes or entirely different attribute abilities.

Even those who did manifest Gop-hwa had slight differences from one user to the

next.

Not everyone in the Gop-hwa clan manifested Gop-hwa.

However, those who did manifest it were, of course, all members of the clan, especially the 'powerful' Gop-hwa which always belonged to the main family.

'…… '

With a troubled face, Hong Yeon-hwa continued to stroke Lee Hayul's head.

For a moment, the touch was awkward, but then his head nestled against her hand, eliciting a faint smile from her.

"…Is this the first time it's manifested?"

"It seems so."

Hong Yeon-hwa agreed with Baek Ahrin, who was intently observing.

"What will you do from now on? Plan to take him into the clan?"

"First, I'll find out if he was part of the clan."

Hong Yeon-hwa's expression hardened.

He had used Gop-hwa. Assuming that if blood ties meant the manifestation of Gop-hwa, then Lee Hayul must be from the Gop-hwa clan.

But why had Lee Hayul been abandoned in an orphanage since infancy? What caused the burn on his right hand, and who had inflicted such a thing on him?

Nothing was certain yet, but those were the things to find out first.

"Is Lee Hayul going to become Hong Hayul?"

"What… that's… I'll have to talk to Hayul first."

"Or are you planning to take him as a son-in-law?"

“What, what? Suddenly what nonsense…! Uhm! Don’t spout weird stuff!”

Baek Ahrin erupted into laughter at the expected fiery response. Hong Yeon-hwa grinded her teeth, yet adjusted her posture just in case Lee Hayul felt uncomfortable.

The awakening of mana and innate abilities are usually determined in childhood.

When Gop-hwa first manifests, it releases flames haphazardly in all directions.

Fortunately, there are precursors that allow for some preparation, but the danger remains.

Along with the inability to control Gop-hwa, there’s also a dramatic surge in emotions.

Lee Hayul’s condition was probably just that. The mana was depleted, so Gop-hwa had stopped, but the emotional surge continued.

And so… he had thrown himself into Hong Yeon-hwa’s embrace.

A surge of emotions, amplification, elevation.

Whatever you call it, it’s difficult to regulate feelings at that moment.

However, there’s a commonality: emotions that did not exist before do not arise.

One can come to hate someone they already dislike even more, but they cannot start to like someone they despise.

Being held by her… did he always want to do that…?

The thought that suddenly crossed her mind made her cheeks warm.

The interior of the dugout was well-lit by magic. Trying to hide her flushed face, she lowered her head and then buried her nose in Lee Hayul’s hair.

“…Sniff?”

Gasp.

Hong Yeon-hwa inhaled sharply. An indescribable sensation shot down her spine. The fragrance that had been subtly wafting over her now struck her mind directly.

Lee Hayul's body scent filled her nostrils. An unfamiliar yet somehow recognizable fragrance…

Maybe it was akin to a blend of the fresh scent of grass and the sweet fragrance of honey.

It wasn't overpoweringly strong but rather a faint body scent filled her chest. Her body trembled with ecstasy.

'Wow, what… is this insane… '

Such madness. Her rationality, which had been melting softly, snapped back in an instant.

Hong Yeon-hwa cursed herself in alarm. She had been indulging in such nonsense.

And just as she was about to raise her head, she sneakily glanced at Baek Ahrin.

"……"

There didn't seem to be any reaction. Baek Ahrin had her eyes closed, idly fiddling with her fingers, likely pondering the Gop-hwa emanating from Lee Hayul.

Though Hong Yeon-hwa's mind was in turmoil, the stimuli of the current situation were more compelling.

"…Ahem."

Hong Yeon-hwa fell silent for a moment, then stealthily lowered her head again. Her nose nestled in the soft hair.

Sniff…

Thinking about it, wasn't Hayul surrendering to his emotions and holding onto her? It's just an amplification of feelings. New emotions don't arise.

So, does that mean Hayul has always wanted to hold her deep down?

If that was the case, couldn't she allow herself this much?

Hong Yeon-hwa justified her thoughts. Despite her mental discipline, she was still young and immature.

'…What is he doing?'

Baek Ahrin tilted her half-closed eyes, bemused.

Hong Yeon-hwa's head was clearly in view. Even muted, the breaths sounded almost perverse.

…Could it be any more blatant than sniffing someone like that?

Cutting the situation out of context—or even within it—the scene was peculiar.

Embracing someone who seemed to have lost consciousness, burying her head in their hair, and sniffing away…

'Isn't that harassment…?'

She considered intervening, then thought about how Lee Hayul usually interacted with Hong Yeon-hwa.

…Given his impassive demeanor, he might be shocked but would probably acquiesce if asked to be sniffed.

Baek Ahrin shook her head in disbelief and got up. She thought to fetch Elia, who must have been bored outside.

She took confident strides out of the dugout.

– Ding!

Suddenly, the breath tickling his ear made Lee Hayul squirm.

* * *

– Ding!

[The Blessing of Growth aids your development.]

[The Blessing of Growth (Special Provision) aids your development.]

[The Blessing of Growth (Entry to the Tower) aids your development.]

[The Curse of Doom aids your development.]

[The Curse of Solitude aids your development.]

[The Curse of Silence aids your development.]

[The Authority '■■ and □□' develops.]

[The Unique Ability 'Jack-of-all-trades' develops.]

[The Unique Ability 'Mana Affinity' develops.]

[The Unique? Ability? '??' manifests temporarily.]

CHAPTER 55
HIDDEN PIECE (1)

I've tasted alcohol before.

It was never with money I spent, nor did I ever drink in exchange for payment.

Instead, there was a time when a soju bottle was forcibly shoved down my throat. I remember the glass bottle thudding against my Adam's apple and the stinging alcohol pouring down my esophagus.

The memories after that event are blurry. People often say their film cuts out. When you close your eyes and the next thing you know, it's the following day.

I experienced something similar just now.

The difference is that back then, my memories before waking were hazy, and my body felt numb.

Now, my memories are as clear as if something were right in front of my nose, my body is brimming with vitality, and my mind is sharp.

The thudding of someone else's heart, not my own, is transmitted through the skin we share.

A distinctly memorable, soft sensation touches my face.

I feel this paradoxical state of clarity and dizziness as I pat Hong Yeon-hwa's back just like before.

"Uhm…?"

– Rustle

Hong Yeon-hwa, who was lying beside me, stirred. After hesitating briefly, she sat up and leaned against the wall, pulling me up with her.

“You’re awake… How do you feel? Are you okay? Any weird spots?”

– Nod, nod

“That’s good…”

Hong Yeon-hwa, still groggy, sighed in relief.

As I nodded along, Hong Yeon-hwa moved her hand.

“…!”

My spine straightened at the touch of the hand patting my back. The surprise made me shake my head from side to side.

“Huh? What’s wrong?”

Hong Yeon-hwa tilted her head, puzzled.

The patting stopped. Instead, her palm pressed against my back, sliding down. A thrilling sensation ran down my spine.

“…!!”

I jerked like a freshly caught fish. Hong Yeon-hwa paused, stunned, mid-motion.

I quickly escaped the embrace and created some distance.

Regardless of any strange glances, I steadied my disheveled breathing.

It was an unexpected event.

The memories of yesterday were clear.

The memory of causing a nuisance in my crazed state was all too vivid. It was strange to be petted like that and then react this way now.

If I were to justify myself, I wasn’t in my right mind back then. There was a reason for my madness.

The flame on my right arm.

'Gop-hwa.'

As I caught my breath, deep thoughts surfaced.

Yesterday's memory was clear. I remembered the embarrassment I caused, and I heard the conversation between Hong Yeon-hwa and Baek Ahrin.

I don't know why, but the flame I produced was called Gop-hwa. Certainly, its might was fitting.

But questions remained unresolved.

'Why?'

Why did Gop-hwa burst from my arm, precisely from the burn scar?

My already cluttered mind was bombarded with more doubts. Now, strange events are bursting from my very body.

I frowned and listened intently. A variety of sounds filled my ears. I visualized a map in my head.

Only Hong Yeon-hwa and I were in the dugout. The presence of the other two was felt above the ceiling.

I pointed a finger at the small exit. Hong Yeon-hwa, who had been gazing at me blankly, also nodded and rose from her spot.

Stepping outside, a refreshing breeze brushed against my skin.

Pressing down my wind-swept hair, I took a deep breath. Fresh air filled my body.

The tightness in my chest eased somewhat, a refreshing relief.

"You're up?"

"Good morning, Hayul!"

Approaching the entrance where Baek Ahrin and Elia were gathered, they greeted me.

Elia and Baek Ahrin had already collected fruit and were preparing it with energy-wrapped hands.

I nodded a greeting back and sat down beside them. Sensing my surroundings, various spells placed all around became perceptible.

They were the security, protection, and barrier spells Baek Ahrin had heavily installed at the temporary base. The level of magic was impressively high. There were many spells I could identify but not interpret.

Observing each one, my tongue clicked in appreciation.

It's no wonder the clans go to great lengths to recruit magicians. With just one such mage, missions and daily life would be incomparably smoother.

'Fourth day… '

I had received an update on the situation from Hong Yeon-hwa before leaving the dugout.

They had retreated to this makeshift refuge considering the state I had been in after the boss fight and the depleted condition of the group.

Almost a whole day had been spent recovering, and now it was already the fourth day.

Tomorrow the tension-filled entry schedule to the tower would end.

The sounds of nature, fingers rustling, and the crunch of fruit being cut filled my ears.

It wasn't bothersome. Just white noise.

I reached out absently.

Baek Ahrin and Elia were preparing what looked to be an apple-like fruit—according to their conversation. I picked up one that hadn't been prepared yet.

Its smooth yet cool surface was similar to an apple's.

Fiddling with it for a moment, I wrapped my opposing index finger with energy.

Not just a crude form, but honed sharp, I skinned the fruit.

Crunch-crunch – the peel fell to the ground.

"Wow, you peel really well."

Baek Ahrin, who had been diligently peeling on the opposite side, expressed her admiration. It seemed fairly neatly cut, judging by feeling.

I kept peeling the fruit collected by the group. For a group of superhumans, such an amount was just another meal.

While my hands moved, my thoughts organized.

There were mainly three things I aimed to achieve by entering the tower.

The first was essential growth.

To enhance overall abilities like physical prowess, mana, unique abilities, and skill proficiency through the amplified Blessing of Growth.

This aspect was more than satisfied. My planned escape strategy had crumbled along with the spatial perception, and I'd spent the first and second days being chased by cadets, grappling with them.

It was a tough experience, but the changes and results I'm feeling now are quite sweet.

The second was the collection of suitable materials.

Thanks to the tower's dense mana concentration — incomparable to the outside — a variety of material items could be obtained.

The fruit I've just bitten into even contains a considerable amount of mana.

Of course, it's nothing compared to an elixir. Still, it's impactful enough.

I had planned to collect these materials through spatial perception, but that, too, ended in shambles.

I thought about collecting some now, but there were limits to finding things with touch, hearing, and mana sensing, so I gave up.

Also, while my current physical state wasn't the worst, it wasn't completely optimal either. It would be more beneficial to my growth to practice quietly on my own.

And the third was acquiring the Hidden Piece.

This part… I really regret missing out.

Considering I'd have been disqualified on the second day without Elia's help, it might just seem like spoiled complaining, but I can't help feeling greedy and regretful.

The trials conducted during the tower entry change each time.

This trial, typically a safe one conducted on the first floor, is where the Hidden Piece I sought could only be found.

'The Origin Egg.'

Ever since I learned of this information, this Hidden Piece has been a must-have in every cycle.

Finding it was simple.

Just locate a structure somewhere on the first floor. With five days given, unless one is unfairly eliminated, there's plenty of time to find it.

Acquiring it was also simple.

From the start, the access condition for the Hidden Piece was being a 'Special Admission Student.'

Unlike other Hidden Pieces randomly plundered by NPCs, this one was exclusive to players.

Just approach the altar, and it opens up.

Easy to reach and the most straightforward to obtain, this Hidden Piece also has an incredible effect.

Among past cycles, the warrior build that ludicrously boosted stats, 'The Diamond Warrior.'

It's no exaggeration to say that the start of the Diamond Warrior's real snowball was the Origin Egg.

With such potency, I desperately wanted to secure it… But here we are.

'Sigh.'

Overflowing with regret, but with spatial perception in this state, it was unavoidable.

As far as I remember, there's a chance to re-enter the first floor at the end of the first year or the beginning of the second.

Now, I can only aim for that time.

'…Where was that place?'

I exhaled deeply while finishing peeling the fruit.

I cut a few pieces into handy sizes and stuffed them in my mouth, recalling the knowledge from the original work.

The first floor is compared to the lush forests of the dinosaur era, but there are mysterious structures of unknown style scattered throughout.

The Origin Egg lies dormant in one of these structures.

I remembered it because of the peculiar descriptions.

'An old stone altar surrounded by eight pillars.'

Three of which were grimy dark…

"—There were eight pillars forming a triangle around the altar with five pristine white pillars creating a pentagon."

‘Huh?’

My chewing stopped abruptly.

“That’s interesting. I also noticed a few odd structures on my way, but all I found were crumbling stone ones. Did you discover anything special?”

“No, I looked around, but they just seemed decorative.”

Suddenly, I was struck with a thought. My head buzzed as if hit by thunder.

I was momentarily slow to process information. Did I just speak out loud? It’s impossible because of the curse.

After gathering my thoughts, I turned my head.

There was Elia, unfolding her tale of seeing something peculiar.

I thought again.

The central altar. Surrounded by eight pillars.

Three black pillars arranged in a triangle.

Five white pillars in a pentagon.

Judgment was made. I sprang up and strode forward.

“…what? So I was saying… Huh? Hayul?”

I reached Elia and grabbed her hand with a slap. Taken aback by the sudden grip, she sent a questioning gaze.

“Hayul?”

“Hayul?”

I felt the gaze of Baek Ahrin and Hong Yeon-hwa from the side. I paid them no heed.

“…!”

Trying to suppress my excitement, I shook her arm vigorously.

After a moment, the patting subdued me.

CHAPTER 56
HIDDEN PIECE (2)

In the world I once knew, I was in a traffic accident. It wasn't catastrophic, but I did put my own head in the way, so to speak.

It was an avoidable accident, and as a result of my recklessness, I became a post-traumatic cripple, confined to a corner of my room with a hefty insurance settlement.

Having lost my part-time job due to my disability, the substantial amount of money I received was more than enough to get by.

Consequently, I moved out of my goshiwon room into a decent one-bedroom apartment.

Life was incredibly comfortable compared to before.

Even the thought of going out briefly meant dealing with the hassle of a wheelchair or crutches, which was far from convenient.

Originally, staying at home suited my personality.

Lolling about in bed was comfortable, but being the ungrateful sort that I am, as soon as comfort set in, I began to crave entertainment.

In my search for amusement, I stumbled upon a game called 'Savior'.

It was the first computer game I'd gotten into after only casually playing puzzle games on my phone.

At that time, I felt like a wild man encountering civilization for the first time—it was incredibly fun, and I got deeply engrossed.

This is why I didn't look up any guides on the internet. It seemed that the fun would disappear if I followed someone else's gameplay.

It might have been the most carefree and happy moment of my life.

“The boss appeared around here. This should be somewhere near the center.”

Baek Ahrin, leading the group, remarked. We had been traveling for a while after leaving the temporary base.

We encountered a few cadets along the way. Given our group’s strength, we could easily eliminate them without any trouble.

Thinking back, even though I was being pursued, I fortunately didn’t encounter any of the main characters.

If I had been chased by a protagonist on the first or second day, I probably would have been eliminated. It dawned on me that my luck had been exceptionally good.

“It seems all the important things are gathered in the center.”

“Definitely, it’s easier to manage if everything is concentrated in one place.”

The center of the first floor. Even here, the ‘land value’ of the center seemed high as both the boss appeared here, and the Hidden Piece existed.

Swallowed by the excitement that I might be able to attain the Hidden Piece, I subdued the thrill with a pat and followed Elia’s lead to this location.

We had returned to the area from which we had fled after battling the boss.

Of course, I didn’t come back here for nothing. It wasn’t a tantrum without reason; I had explained my rationale.

There was something special at the place Elia had discovered. If they helped me, I would share the reward appropriately.

The question came back to me.

How do you know that?

“Is the Principal’s educational method ‘Tamryeokdeukju’?”

Baek Ahrin mumbled thoughtfully.

Tamryeokdeukju, meaning ‘seeking the black dragon to obtain the pearl’, is an idiom about taking great risks for great rewards.

“In exchange for focusing everyone’s attention with a score equivalent to the boss, he gives the location of a special reward… If you can hold out, it sounds like a good deal to get through the trial and receive the reward.”

In essence, the higher the stakes, the greater the payoff upon success.

“Drawing aggro and trying to hold out, what’s that all about?”

Hong Yeon-hwa, who was keeping watch at the rear, replied gruffly to Baek Ahrin’s muttering.

Walking closely behind Elia, I inwardly shook my head. Despite my good fortune, I had nearly been eliminated on the second day.

Persuading the group wasn’t difficult because I had an invincible reason.

An unprecedented special admission student. A cadet chosen by the Principal.

That status served as an excellent excuse. I was the only special admission student. There was no other announcement or instruction from the professors directed at me.

Did the Principal really tell me where the Origin Egg was? No. I don’t even know what the Principal looks like.

Even in recorded history, while the existence of the Principal can be confirmed through heroic deeds, for some reason, the Principal’s physical appearance is absent from past records.

That ambiguity actually helped. In the original story, the owner of The Tower of Growth never revealed themselves in any situation.

I’m not sure how it will be this time… but so far, the fact that the Principal has left their special admission student to their own devices seems to suggest a similar attitude to the original story.

No one here can discern my falsehood. The only ones who could question the truth are me and the silent Principal.

The only difficulty in convincing them was that I couldn't speak and had to write letters on the ground.

Sign language was too awkward after such a long time.

"Here it is."

Elia, who had been scouring the surroundings, announced. The group moved through the forest to reach the location.

Immediately, my senses also picked up on the odd place. The underbrush tickling my thighs receded, revealing an open space as a breeze suddenly blew through.

"It's definitely different from the structure I saw."

Baek Ahrin, surveying the surrounding, commented.

A spacious clearing emerged as we pushed through the undergrowth.

In the midst of it lay a stone altar imbued with a strange magic, enveloped by eight pillars.

With my spatial perception damaged, I couldn't discern the exact appearance. The knowledge I had was only from what I saw in the original work.

But I could feel it.

Three black pillars encircle the stone altar in a triangle.

I felt them as black. The inherent dark and threatening magic influenced that sensation.

Five white pillars encased the stone altar in a pentagon.

I felt them as white. The inherent firm and solid magic influenced that sensation.

"Is this the place, Hayul?"

Before entering the clearing, Baek Ahrin checked the surroundings with magic and turned to ask. I paused from sensing the magic of the pillars and nodded.

“Then let’s enter.”

Following that, the group moved forward. I swallowed hard and followed closely.

‘What will happen?’

Though I persuaded them confidently to come here, I wasn’t actually certain.

The first discovery of the Origin Egg was in the third cycle.

After a rough experience in the first cycle and having no leisure time in the second cycle due to grapples with other cadets, the third cycle allowed me the freedom to explore The Tower of Growth and finally discovered the Origin Egg at the center of the map.

It was a story from the game.

Now that the game’s world has become reality, I know not to outright reject its information. But still, it’s just a game, isn’t it?

Would it be the same in reality? Will the reward just appear? There was some doubt in the back of my mind.

What if there was no reaction even after I approached? I would have had to use the Principal’s name in vain again.

– Woong!

My worries were unfounded.

The moment I stepped into the clearing, the five white pillars began to vibrate. The tremor of the ground was unmistakably felt through my legs.

The group halted. Their eyes, filled with the question of whether to continue approaching me.

I nodded and moved forward again. Walking over the flat earthen ground, I made my

way toward the altar.

Even as I approached, the pillars continued to emit vibrations. It wasn't a sensation of impending danger, oddly, it felt like a welcome.

Finally, I stood before the altar.

I paused to listen. The vibrating white pillars. There were no such effects in the original. What was different?

…In reality, there was no need to ponder too deeply. After all, this was The Tower of Growth; the worst that could happen was being eliminated and expelled outside.

I settled my mind a bit and reached out toward the altar.

A cool sensation filled my palm. It also captured the roughness of an unmaintained structure's surface.

"……"

Nothing happened. Was it a misfire? It was time to consider that possibility, but just then, a refreshing magic blossomed from the altar.

Magic, like smoke, seeped from the crevices of the stone altar. It was not as potent as my mana but was of high purity.

The leaking magic slowly colored the surroundings. Gradually, the changing scope of magic encompassed the three black pillars and enveloped the five white ones.

– Creak, clack

A sound like an unoiled machine groaning echoed near my ear. It originated from inside the altar.

The altar jolted. Then the vibration intensified.

I stepped back reflexively as the altar shook like a quaking aspen.

Before I could retreat many steps, the jostling of the altar stopped.

After a brief pause, the altar crumbled from one side, collapsing.

A dull noise accompanied by a cloud of dust rushed over. I covered my nose and mouth with my hand.

More importantly, my senses fixated elsewhere. Inside the now-collapsed altar, there was an object emanating a curious magic.

I hadn't noticed it until the altar fell apart. Even with my knowledge from the original work, I hadn't been aware.

An elongated, egg-shaped object larger than a human head. The nature of the magic was hard to describe.

'The Origin Egg.'

There it was. Real, just like in the game. There was a Hidden Piece in reality, too.

It was as if my closed eyes were twinkling in realization.

In a rush, I stepped over the fallen stone debris and picked up the Origin Egg.

Given its size, it felt weighty. It must be quite heavy in reality, but given my current physical prowess, it was insignificant.

I fondled the egg's surface in my arms. A smooth warmth passed through my palm.

"Oho."

As I inspected the Origin Egg, Baek Ahrin approached from a distance and tapped the egg with her finger.

I stifled the reflex to flinch from the sudden coolness and, with a curious expression, showed the egg to the group.

"Is this egg the reward?"

– Nod

Hong Yeon-hwa, who had also approached, asked. As I nodded, she continued with a

puzzled tone.

“Hard to tell from the outside. What exactly is this egg used for?”

“Could it be an ingredient for an elixir?”

“Is that so? I’ve heard monster eggs are quite utilized…”

As they speculated about its use, I waited and then picked up a fallen stick to write letters on the ground.

“Huh?”

I felt Hong Yeon-hwa blink in surprise. Baek Ahrin and Elia also appeared similarly bewildered.

Elia read the letters I had written on the ground, questioning if her reading was correct.

“Lottery?”

To her question, I circled the word ‘lottery’ I had written with the stick, affirming it.

The Origin Egg.

A Hidden Piece with a basic option of reading the user’s wish and so on.

Using it grants a random item of a specific grade or higher.

It can yield anything from a mundane set of elixirs to high-tier artifacts that are hard to come by in the game’s later stages.

Essentially, it’s a high-end random gacha.

“Hmm…”

After hearing the explanation, the group all seemed to exude a peculiar air.

After a moment of contemplation and swallowing, Hong Yeon-hwa blurted out.

“Should we take a bite?”

“…!”

I panicked and hid the Origin Egg behind me.

CHAPTER 57
CRAZY DOG

As dusk began to hint at the horizon, the group, having secured the reward known as the Origin Egg, thoroughly searched the nearby structures and concluded there was nothing more to salvage, and so they left the area.

“Just a little taste. It’s so large, what’s there to worry about? Right? How about it?”

– Shake, shake

“Right? Honestly, aren’t you curious about the taste, Hayul? If we draw something weird, it’s a loss. It seems like there’s something inside when we knock on it, let’s cook and taste it.”

– Shake, shake!

The majority of the schedule had come to an end. By tomorrow evening, we would automatically be expelled from the tower.

But complacency is dangerous. As the end of the schedule approaches, there are always cadets ready to hunt one last time.

If one harbors the dull thought that it’s almost over, one might be eliminated by other cadets.

Therefore, Baek Ahrin, who was looking for a suitable place to spend the last day, turned her head at the commotion coming from behind.

Lee Hayul was seen making a face and shaking his head vigorously, the cause being the mischievously inclined Hong Yeon-hwa and Elia flanking him.

The two were tapping on the Origin Egg, suggesting frivolously to make fried eggs or an omelette, and every time, Lee Hayul would fuss and squirm.

It looked as if the Origin Egg was so precious that he held it tightly to his chest.

Though it was not malicious teasing, and he didn't seem to truly hate it, he was still desperately defending the Origin Egg.

Watching this scene, Baek Ahrin was reminded of something Elia had said before.

That Lee Hayul was fun to tease because he reacted so vividly.

To Baek Ahrin, it seemed the same.

If he'd just brushed it off calmly, it would have ended there. But with such rich reactions, it was tempting to continue the teasing.

At first, it seemed only Elia was doing it, but intrigued by Lee Hayul's unique responses, Hong Yeon-hwa had joined in the mischief.

"They're having a good time."

Baek Ahrin sighed inwardly at the merry scene. If it weren't for her role as the party leader, she might have joined in the fun…

Though they seemed to be relaxing and enjoying themselves, Baek Ahrin didn't say anything.

Despite appearances, all three were on guard for any sign of trouble around them.

Ready to respond to a surprise attack at any moment.

Hong Yeon-hwa, as the heir of the Gop-hwa clan, and Elia, who had attended a specialized academy from a young age, both had been trained that way.

And in their midst, Lee Hayul, who had become a superhuman just two months ago and had been at Shio-ram for barely a month, was also in a state of readiness.

Even as his eyesight was engulfed by darkness and his temporary sensory abilities were disabled, he would respond appropriately if an ambush came.

"……"

Baek Ahrin reflected on the recent past.

The day of the welcoming party for the new students, she couldn't gauge Lee Hayul's potential.

She thought there must be a reason since it was the Principal's decision.

After the official academic schedule started and they were assigned to the same class.

Lee Hayul grew unrecognizably with each passing day.

It made sense.

A newly awakened superhuman usually has a sharp growth curve. Plus, with the Blessing of Growth, his progress was supposed to be fast.

Baek Ahrin's thoughts changed as time passed.

The first day, the second day… the growth was comprehensible.

The third day… the fourth day… the following week.

As time went on, his growth became more pronounced. It wasn't just a diagonal graph; it was like constructing a building, spiking up into the sky.

His body grew, and a wealth of mana accumulated inside him. Even his clumsy basic postures were corrected day by day.

Even with the Blessing of Growth, it was an exceptional rate of progress.

A recent bout had confirmed this.

Aidan Reynolds. Though an easy opponent for Baek Ahrin, he was still a Shio-ram student.

He was also a superhuman who had awakened his mana and unique abilities from an early age and had been educated at a specialized institution for superhuman development.

Being admitted to Shio-ram itself meant he was recognized as a student with world-class potential.

Yet, Lee Hayul had defeated such an opponent.

It was an absurd event. Lee Hayul seemed unaware as he didn't check the community, but the result of that duel was a hot topic.

There were flukes in the process. A victory established by a gamble that paid off.

But it was Lee Hayul who met the minimum requirements for that gambler's luck to work.

In just a month, he had raised his physical abilities to the level of a student, acquired the quality to cross swords, and demonstrated the skill to wield Qi and vigor at a high level.

At that point, most doubts about his special admission had faded away. It was like slowly uncovering a winning lottery ticket.

I heard about his exploits in the dungeon practice.

Improved physical abilities and skills, special sensory abilities exhibited in exploration.

He had even begun to dabble in magic in the meantime. Magic that takes years to grasp without talent.

It was astonishing. Admirable. If this pace of growth continues, he will become an unbelievable hero in the future.

And that expectation was shattered.

"……"

Over the past few days of the schedule.

The outcome in The Tower of Growth was hard to accept. His face was friendly, but inside, it was filled with doubts about his rate of growth.

Baek Ahrin had planned to find Lee Hayul in The Tower of Growth and help him.

She would find him and help, bestowing a favor. Even if it's simple, she would

accumulate such debts. Building a relationship that wasn't too burdensome.

But she didn't really expect to succeed. Honestly, she thought it was more likely that he would be eliminated before she could find him.

The result was different.

He had turned the tables on the cadets who underestimated him and charged at him.

It wasn't a scenario like the previous duels.

It was in the forest, spread in all directions, a one-against-many, a series of battles.

Did he eliminate more than ten cadets? If counted as injuries instead of eliminations, that number would be surpassed.

The outcome of this entry into the tower won't end with just a ruckus. It's fuel for a fire incomparable to what happened during the duel.

Moreover, even now, he was growing at an incredible rate. Was it due to the compounded Blessing of Growth? Even considering that, it was a phenomenon beyond comprehension.

Baek Ahrin hadn't realized at first.

Afterward, it was extraordinary, absurd, yet astonishing.

Now…

– It's dangerous.

Thump! Her heart pounded fiercely, the vibration spreading to the tips of her limbs. For a moment, her body stiffened.

The beating of the heart, the source of life. Most living beings have a heart that beats every moment.

Baek Ahrin was no different. The only difference was that occasionally her frozen heart would stop.

After one beat, a chill filled her heart. Cold blood infused with that chill spread throughout her body. The icy coldness coursed through veins and circuits.

Her body embraced the coldness, not warmth.

Baek Ahrin had always been well-liked for her constant smile and soft demeanor.

Now…

"……"

Such an expression was nowhere to be found.

Her face, hardened like ice. The emotionless, expressionless face that made it impossible to see her as the same Baek Ahrin of before.

Her eyes, which could have been likened to the ocean before, now resembled the dark depths of the sea.

"Huh?"

Suddenly, Hong Yeon-hwa diverted her gaze.

Their eyes met.

The icy visage of Baek Ahrin caught in Hong Yeon-hwa's red eyes.

After gazing intently at Baek Ahrin, Hong Yeon-hwa tilted her head.

"What are you looking at?"

Her usual demeanor. Hong Yeon-hwa had not noticed Baek Ahrin's change.

'Masks' served that purpose. If one couldn't hide a face, it wouldn't be called a mask.

– Thump!

The frozen heart beat faintly. Though it lasted only a moment, the stiff heart began to beat again.

Her expression softened. The frozen face melted away, and her usual smile instantly returned.

Baek Ahrin resumed her normal tone, feigning incredulity.

“Why are you picking a fight again? Are you letting your true nature show?”

“True nature, my ass. You were acting weird… no, you were looking at me.”

“That’s enough, if even Hayul knows you’re insincere… Just speak up. Besides, stop teasing Hayul. Can’t you see he’s troubled?”

Finishing her words, Baek Ahrin turned away. She ignored the grumbling Hong Yeon-hwa behind her.

It was a common occurrence since childhood between them.

Somewhat disgruntled, Hong Yeon-hwa would start a quarrel and then be dominated by Baek Ahrin’s retort.

Even the servants of their respective clans were familiar with such scenes.

The difference this time was that Baek Ahrin had not reacted much to the prank.

– Thump!

Her cold heart beat. The pulse as if conveying intent, Baek Ahrin laid her hand over her chest.

A fragment of intention was transmitted through the beat.

– Kill him

Baek Ahrin’s eyes widened. It was the first time it had expressed its will so clearly.

Different from the previous vague hints, it was an intention so blatant and intuitive that even a three-year-old could understand.

Could it be judging the situation as that dangerous?

After pondering for a moment with a blink, Baek Ahrin smiled broadly and murmured to herself.

“Go to hell, you asshole.”

It’s said that even a temple dog can recite poetry after three years.

It’s been over ten years since she’s been mixed up with the mad dog, Hong Yeon-hwa.

Her mastery of profanity would not pale anywhere she goes.

CHAPTER 58
A MISSTEP WITH AN AXE WE DON'T TRUST

Shio-ram varies its curriculum slightly with each year level.

The first year is focused on enhancing inherent abilities.

For cadets who may not know the basics or haven’t found their aptitude yet, they cram a variety of foundational knowledge during a few months of a free semester.

Only after completing the entrance to the tower and the basic exams are cadets officially given the right to choose their classes. This is essentially the real free semester.

Over the course of a year, they stuff knowledge in and restrict outside activities, nurturing their innate basic abilities within a safe cradle.

In just one year.

The cadets of Shio-ram make a growth possible that is different from the outside world.

There are various reasons, of course, but at the root of it all is the existence of The Tower of Growth.

The Blessing of Growth.

The authority of the tower, bestowed by the owner of The Tower of Growth, Neriel Claidya.

‘I think the base multiplier was five times?’

With just the base multiplier, it’s five times.

What others struggle to achieve in five years outside, one can complete in a year here.

Add to that periodic entry into The Tower of Growth and the world's highest level of education.

It's literally a space for growth.

Day 5 in the tower.

From the fourth day, other than getting wrapped up in battles that seemed intended to mark the end, nothing special had occurred.

Before my skills excelled, it was difficult to run into danger with the second- and first-ranked teaming up and covering my back.

To put it directly, I was on the receiving end of a bus ride.

I faced a trial similar to an ordeal on the first and second days, and after overcoming the risk of elimination through various connections, now I'm comfortably reaping the benefits of practice.

On top of that, I even got the Origin Egg I had given up on.

It's so sweet I feel like my teeth might rot. In the end, I'm doing this through networking… but what can I do? Shio-ram itself encourages the formation of connections.

With the spare time that remained, I trained.

When I was frantically being chased, I was too distracted to notice, but now as I calmly observe my body, I can feel the changes happening in real time.

It was ridiculous. I could feel my body growing as I moved, and my core and circuits growing as I used mana.

"Aargh…"

At that moment, a groaning sound came from nearby.

The source was Hong Yeon-hwa. She was sitting on a stump, groaning. Startled by the untimely death throes, Baek Ahrin asked with curiosity.

“Why have you been like that since earlier?”

“My body’s not in good shape. Must be because of all the Qi abuse. Maybe I overdid it…”

Muttering her complaints, I paused my training and focused on my mana.

I took a closer look at the massive amount of mana harbored by Hong Yeon-hwa.

Soon, I felt a difference.

The mana, which seemed capable of burning anything, was tangled somewhere insecurely.

“Ah… I did increase the output too much during the boss fight, didn’t I? I told you not to use your expansion ability.”

“I had no choice but to use Qi to kill in one blow. What did you think would happen if it got away?”

“Oh boy, so? Will you help?”

Baek Ahrin raised one hand. A cool energy rippled from her palm. It was the manifestation of Changhae.

Most users of Gop-hwa suffer from chronic problems with their output.

It’s not a lack of output; it’s the burden. Gop-hwa, which boasts the highest output among unique abilities, often harms its user.

One of the ways to reduce the burden of Gop-hwa is to receive the help of Changhae.

Changhae, with its healing properties of Water Qi and characteristic Cold Qi, is a panacea for reducing the burden of Gop-hwa.

To Baek Ahrin’s question, Hong Yeon-hwa groaned in contemplation and then soon shook her head.

“It’s okay. I’ll handle it myself. Besides, we’re inside the tower, and I’ve been told it’s better to accustom oneself to deal with this alone.”

“That’s true. It’s best to adjust yourself if possible…”

Hong Yeon-hwa’s output has always been exceptionally high in the history of the Gop-hwa clan.

She must have been suppressing it with her innate control ability until now, but this time, after letting loose, the burden is coming.

‘Will it happen this time, too?’

If it follows the original story, then it must be growing pains.

The Qi released during the boss fight and the multiplier from the Blessing of Growth stimulated Hong Yeon-hwa’s Gop-hwa to transform.

It was always like this in the original work.

In every loop, Hong Yeon-hwa’s Gop-hwa changed after her first entry into the tower.

Gop-hwa is a very special unique ability, and it’s said that when it changes, the user undergoes an internal trial. The same goes for a few other top-tier unique abilities, including Changhae and Taesan.

According to the original work’s Hong Yeon-hwa, her trial involved overcoming and burning away the guilt she accumulated throughout her life to use as fuel.

Anyway, Hong Yeon-hwa will easily overcome the trial and evolve her unique ability once.

‘…Gop-hwa.’

As I thought about it, the keyword ‘Gop-hwa’ caught my attention. I casually touched my right arm. Despite being wrapped in an arm cover, I felt a foreign sensation.

On the day of the freshman welcoming party, I distinguished Hong Yeon-hwa not by her voice but because I felt her mana first.

I couldn’t help but think of the term ‘Gop-hwa’ from the flame that seemed to burn the world even while lying dormant inside her.

That's how I was able to distinguish her. Because users of Gop-hwa harbor fiery Qi. I couldn't help but notice it even if I wanted to look away.

My right arm? My mana was just like clear mineral water. There was no fiery Qi to be found.

Yet I used Gop-hwa. It's strange.

These days, I'm often experiencing things that make no sense.

Will I also undergo the trial of Gop-hwa?

With that concern, I rummaged through the memories of the original work. At best, there was only one reference case.

'The third loop.'

The character 'Triple Threat' from the third loop.

If the second loop was about a warrior character grown in a standard way utilizing previous loop knowledge, the third was a large-scale warfare character that actively used various shortcuts.

Despite being only half-baked, this character managed to possess three unique abilities: Gop-hwa, Changhae, and Taesan, due to a combination of various Hidden Pieces and unexpected luck discovered in the first and second loops.

Just as Changhae reduces the burden of Gop-hwa, I wondered if the synergy of the three unique abilities could reduce each other's burden.

It did flow similarly in reality. They compensated for each other's weaknesses, resulting in an increase in output.

The third loop was generally clumsy in the early stages, but the output was comparable to that of the later loops.

The problem was that it ended in self-destruction due to the inability to handle such output.

From the creation of the character, the unique ability 'Vessel' was chosen to increase

the limit, but the actual body was too weak and miserably failed.

There was no event called the trial of Gop-hwa in the third loop.

Of course, it was only half-baked and a minor reference, so who knows what reality will bring.

This matter was first brought to my attention by Hong Yeon-hwa.

She suggested we go to the main house together for a check-up, just in case.

Since I didn't understand the situation, I had agreed.

In fact, I felt uneasy. From the Gop-hwa clan's perspective, it's concerning for an outsider to suddenly possess their unique ability.

When I expressed my anxiety, Hong Yeon-hwa reassured me it was safe, that there would definitely be no problem, so I nodded.

Come to think of it, didn't the original work mention the professors watching over the tower's trials? Did they catch me using Gop-hwa…

'I guess they did… '

The first and second-ranked wouldn't miss a scene where the boss was being taken down.

Still, considering this sensitive issue, I silently prayed it would be kept confidential.

The professors wouldn't have gone mad and spread rumors around the neighborhood about me using Gop-hwa.

I set aside my worries and resumed training.

That's how I killed some time.

Hong Yeon-hwa managed her Gop-hwa, and Elia and Baek Ahrin were also doing their respective personal training.

The atmosphere was quite relaxed.

How much time had passed?

– Crackle

Suddenly, the sound of something breaking reached my ears. I tried to turn my head in the direction of the sound.

Time slowed down. My perception of time decelerated. My actions were frustratingly slow.

I realized instinctively. Now it's time for the exit.

'I'm leaving now.'

At the same time, my consciousness became distant. It felt like my consciousness was being forcibly pulled in.

It was simultaneously long and short. Both my time inside the tower and this moment I'm feeling right now.

It was a contradictory sentiment.

– Ding!

My consciousness was engulfed in darkness.

* * *

– Ding!

[You have passed the Trial of Growth (1st Floor).]

[The number of cadets you have eliminated is 18.]

[The score you have earned is 750 points.]

[You have survived until Day 5, and the full score is reflected.]

[The player(?) is exiting The Tower of Growth.]

[The ‘Blessing of Growth (Entry)’ is being retrieved.]

* * *

– Whoosh

The wind brushed against my cheeks. My hair fluttered slightly. It was different from the wind I felt just a moment ago.

The air touching my skin was different. Unlike the humidity before, the weather was relatively dry.

My sluggish consciousness returned. My legs standing on the ground transmitted countless vibrations.

‘…… ’

I breathed out dumbly and clenched one fist.

– Creak…

The force in my grasp felt awkward. Compared to before entry, it was several times lighter.

As I was ejected from the tower, all negative aspects, injuries, and fatigue disappeared, leaving only positive changes.

While checking my strange physical condition, I heard the bustling commotion of the ejected cadets.

“Ah, I’m out.”

“Damn, getting killed on the first day because I showed off is really hell.”

“Hong Yeon-hwa, you bitch! Why did you kill me too—!”

Despair, satisfaction, anger, and more. A variety of emotions swirled around the plaza.

Those who were eliminated early and spent time in the training room were gloomy,

while those who survived until the end seemed relatively cheerful.

I had exited the tower.

The moment I became aware of that, the spatial perception that had been suppressed within me unfurled.

The oppressive feeling that was pressing down disappeared and the area excitedly expanded.

The unstable mental map regained its proper color. It was just spatial information, but now I could properly see shapes and colors.

'……'

But given all the hardships I endured inside the tower, the sensation was bittersweet and dissatisfying.

When it first emerged, it almost killed me, and when it mattered most, it was useless…

The radius expanded to 100m, 200m, 300m… it was slowly unfurling.

400m, 500m, 600m… In the process, the size increased. Perhaps it had been growing steadily all along despite being suppressed.

700m… 800m…

'Huh.'

It kept widening. Like a spring that had been compressed to its limit being released, the amount of information increased exponentially.

It passed 1km. It didn't stop.

And that wasn't all.

The range didn't just widen.

The density of information increased. The quality of the observed information

improved.

The Tower of Growth was swallowed up in the range. The observations crowded into my mind.

The axes of space, walls, repulsion, the principles of restraint and silence, the internal expansion rate, and external protective walls…

The spells inscribed in every nook and cranny of the ground. Modified spells, manifested spells, the total amount of mana supplied, and its circulation…

Humans, outer clothing, skin, muscles, skeleton, blood, nerves, circuits, core, heart, mana, internal organs…

Space is observed.

– Fizzz…

My head felt heavy. My mind momentarily flared up. Unable to handle the volume of information, my thought processes gradually slowed down.

It was a familiar sensation. Faint but definitely intense memory.

It was similar to the sensation that almost killed me on the first day.

My blood turned cold.

'Ah.'

What the hell is wrong with this bastard?

I clenched my teeth and adjusted my spatial perception.

CHAPTER 59
REST

Spatial perception is one of my unique abilities, classifiable as somewhat active amidst those I possess.

Unlike the versatile Eight-Directions Charm and Mana Affinity, which imparts affinity to mana, the other two are passive unique abilities, constantly in effect.

Although spatial perception has more of a passive nature, the fact that I can control it aligns it somewhat with active abilities.

On the first day, my inability to control it nearly killed me.

My broadly unfurled spatial perception was feeding in more information than my brain could handle, and I almost blew a fuse.

I didn't know how to filter the incoming information or lessen the load of what was being dragged in.

Even stranger was that day's spatial perception weirdly high performance, so the volume of incoming information was grotesquely overwhelming.

Even now, recalling that day makes me break out in cold sweat. If I had failed to control it then, I would have died right there.

–……

Thoughts slowed down. It's too much information to handle. All manner of things flooded my mind.

Processing slowed down. Consequently, thoughts slowed down. It felt as though the world was slowing down with me.

It was dangerous. Instinctively, I reined in my spatial perception.

‘Reduce.’

I reeled in the space perception that was expanding out of control. I narrowed the km-spanning range back down.

‘Filter.’

I set criteria for the observed information. I prevented unnecessary details from seeping in. Space, the body, mana, spells, internal mechanisms of facilities… I blocked out in-depth data that was unnecessary for the moment.

I adjusted the observed space.

I folded space and filtered the influx of information.

It was challenging. The spatial perception that had been suppressed was now rampaging out of control. That made it difficult to adjust.

But gradually, I managed to tame it. I was no longer the me from the first day.

Since then, how many times had I handled spatial perception? My proficiency was on a different level now.

I prevented further expansion and sorted the collection of information.

My head spun. Even as I adjusted the perception, information kept coming in – overwhelmingly superfluous.

At that moment, a ‘pop’ sound echoed from within me.

Suddenly, my nose tingled. It became cumbersome to breathe. As I touched my nose, bright red blood smeared my hand.

‘Nosebleed.’

I hadn’t really bled on the first day… or had I?

My mind went blank for a moment as I tried to recall that day. The first day, the moment when spatial perception unfolded…

…What happened? The memory was hazy, as if shrouded in fog.

“Finally over… Naahh! Hayul?!”

While absent-mindedly managing spatial perception, a scream erupted nearby.

When I drew in the information from that direction, there was Hong Yeon-hwa with her face pale as a sheet, her attractive red hair rippling.

It’s been only five days, but it feels like an eternity since I’ve properly observed a face.

“Why?! What happened?!”

Hong Yeon-hwa rushed over, inspecting me. Her overly dramatic reaction drew the attention of those around.

Murmurs filled the air. The bewildered responses were essentially, ‘What’s with that kid?’ I quickly wiped my nose.

This is too much of an overreaction for just a nosebleed.

I felt a certain emotion, but brushed it off and shook my head as if it was nothing.

Then, an itch caught my eye. Even closed, I felt a trickling sensation inside.

And then, steadily…

Blood dripped from my eye. A line of blood trailed down my cheek.

‘Ah?’

“Ah.”

Hong Yeon-hwa’s movements, as she reached for a tissue to wipe my nose, froze.

It didn’t stop there. The other eye began to itch, and blood followed. Two red lines were drawn.

Hong Yeon-hwa’s mouth gaped open.

Her expression was as if the world was collapsing.

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There was a bit of commotion.

It was just Elia and Baek Ahrin, cadets with healing abilities, rushing over after hearing the noise, and Hong Yeon-hwa's world coming crashing down.

Before long, the first-year professors came to check on my condition.

The Chunbun class professor, renowned for his mastery of compound magic, Theonil Arban, examined my face and gave his diagnosis.

"It appears the cause is the excessive use of abilities. Did you experience abnormalities with your abilities during the trials?"

– Nod

"A sudden change in abilities… It's curious that The Tower of Growth did not detect it. Regardless, I advise you to rest. Refrain from using your abilities for a while, if possible."

I nodded in agreement with Professor Theonil's diagnosis.

The other students had long dispersed.

Just coming out of The Tower of Growth, while physical injuries and fatigue had vanished, mental exhaustion remained.

Those who wandered around me restlessly were sent back by Professor Liana's well-worded guidance.

"Then it would be best to take a complete rest this week. Wouldn't it, Cadet Lee Hayul?"

Professor Liana, who had been listening to the diagnosis alongside me, let out a deep sigh.

I nodded as if to show I was listening. Professor Liana continued with a complicated expression.

“Let’s talk about the trial later. Rest assured, nothing from it has been spoken about.”

It was the conversation I wanted to hear. I nodded in relief.

The third loop with Gop-hwa, Changhae, Taesan.

I was the quickest to assimilate Gop-hwa and then manipulated Taesan.

But once I was caught using Taesan, the whole network of relationships turned upside down.

Fearing a similar situation this time, Liana’s confirmation eased my mind.

Seeing the change in my expression, Professor Liana chuckled and reached out her hand. Her tender touch brushed my hair.

A familiar caress. At first, it was awkward, but now I didn’t mind. To be honest, it felt good.

“……”

As her hand continued the gentle strokes, I felt a strange gaze.

It came from Professor Atra. She was staring intently at me with a complex look on her face.

Professor Atra was not responsible for the first-years, but she had been observing the trials as my major’s professor.

Curious as to what this could be about, I tilted my head toward Professor Atra and then a thought crossed my mind.

‘Feedback?’

Professor Atra had witnessed me fighting doggedly for five days. From her perspective, there must have been a plethora of critique points ready to pour out.

I straightened up, signaling I was ready to listen.

Professor Atra remained silent for a moment before speaking.

"…Well…"

'Well?'

Uncharacteristically, Professor Atra fumbled over her words. It seemed as though she was hesitating. That made me feel uneasy.

'Was it that bad?'

Considering the state of my spatial perception, I thought I fought pretty well.

Certainly, compared to movements enhanced by spatial perception, there were many flaws.

Had spatial perception been fully operational, I could have doubled my score.

To Professor Atra, who had only seen me using spatial perception, did my actions during the trial look like a complete mess?

I waited nervously for the next words, sweating internally.

"…You did well."

I was dumbfounded by the unexpected praise.

"There are issues with the sensory abilities that need to be addressed, but it was a good choice to quickly devise a plan and take action in such circumstances."

The praise, if you could call it that, continued. It wasn't a lengthy speech. Perhaps out of consideration for my condition, she only had a few words to say.

That was surprising enough.

I knew Professor Atra was a kind person, especially after receiving concern instead of causing a nuisance last time, but I had never heard such praise before.

Seeing my expression, Professor Atra awkwardly turned her head, meeting the peculiar gaze of Professor Liana.

A strange expression… more precisely, a smirking one.

"…Why that face?"

"No reason?"

Retorting thus, Professor Liana turned her gaze towards me and extended a hand. My smartwatch was in her palm.

Delighted, I accepted the smartwatch. For a moment, it felt like I regained my halved smile.

"You should go in now, Cadet Lee Hayul. Have a good rest over the weekend, and let's meet next week."

With a bright smile and a wave from Professor Liana and an indifferent nod from Professor Atra, I returned the greeting and turned away.

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I returned to the dorm.

'It feels like it's been a while.'

I threw the life-worn uniform into the laundry basket, and as I changed into new clothes, something felt off.

It was only about five days away, but I felt this strong response.

It was even more so because I often left the dormitory unoccupied.

In the mornings I attended general lectures, and in the afternoons, I took classes from Professor Atra, then usually headed to the library or to the individual practice rooms.

After changing clothes, I sat on the bed. The plush sensation enveloped my hips soothingly. And with that, a massive temptation knocked on the door of my senses.

Telling me to lie down, to fall asleep here…

'…I shouldn't sleep, though.'

Physical injuries and fatigue were gone, but the mental exhaustion was still significant.

Had that been all, I wouldn't have minded. I was tired in many ways, but that wasn't a reason to waste time.

But after coming out of the tower, spatial perception had backstabbed me. It had burst forth without warning, unleashing a powerful mental assault.

Particularly in front of Hong Yeon-hwa, and with every eye in the vicinity upon me, I had to feign composure, but it was actually quite dangerous.

I felt like I could pass out at any moment. The bed's allure made it even more likely.

Compared to the brush with death on the first day, it was tremendous progress… but tiredness was inevitable.

'…Just a little sleep.'

After a moment's hesitation, I nodded.

I would sleep just for a moment… then wake up and check the plan.

With that self-justification, I tidied up my things. Among them, the Origin Egg, which I debated over before placing on the bedroom shelf.

After a quick wash and changing into comfortable attire, I threw myself onto the bed. The fluffy sensation swallowed my body whole.

My mind settled down. Internally reciting the sleeping technique taught to me by Professor Liana, I let go of consciousness.

* * *

Not a minute after Lee Hayul laid down on the bed, he began to breathe evenly, fast asleep.

Curled up under the thick blanket, only a part of his face was visible peeking out.

In the midst of the tranquil silence,

without any interference, the Origin Egg wobbled.

– Ding

Then, a quiet alarm sounded in the peaceful bedroom.

[The Origin Egg is reading the owner's wish.]

CHAPTER 60
AFTERMATH (1)

I don't want to wake up.

Burying my face in the pillow and wriggling around filled my head with that thought.

All through the trials, I had to sleep on dirt floors covered with leaves. It was a tad uncomfortable, but not a significant issue.

I've slept on stone floors more times than I can count. That's how little I bothered about my sleeping arrangements.

But, of course, sleeping in a bed is the most comfortable. There is nothing in the world that can match the unique plushness of a bed… Uh… Hmm…

…

…Now that I think about it, it seems like the second most comfortable thing.

I quickly shook my head, dismissing the ridiculous thought that had popped up. The image of red that had appeared before my eyes scattered.

Lately, my head's been strange. Should I get a mental check-up? It could be an aftereffect of Gop-hwa.

If I stay like this, I might just roll around all day long, so I forced my upper body upright.

The cushy sensation receded. With tears in my eyes over this tragic parting from the bed, I got up.

Saturday morning was quite leisurely. No pressing schedules to blame.

'Grrrgr… '

I loosened my stiff body with some simple stretching. A refreshing pleasure surged through me.

After enjoying the sensation, I entered the shower and doused myself with cold water.

Thanks to this, my sleepiness was washed away, but I didn't like to continue with cold water, so halfway through, I compromised with lukewarm water.

'Am I okay now?'

My hand paused, about to scrub my face with a handful of water. Yesterday's incident came to mind. I tentatively touched around my eyes.

Eyes that had rolled with tears, no, blood tears.

I pretended it was nothing, but I genuinely thought I was going to faint. For a moment, I nearly went mad thinking my eyes were ruined.

Not being able to see doesn't mean uselessness. These eyes will recover one day. I need to cherish them as if they were precious treasures.

Spatial perception took over the role of sight. Thanks to it, I could see better than the sighted people in my everyday life, not just without inconvenience but perhaps even better.

It pricks my conscience being treated and cared for as though I'm physically impaired.

Even after telling others about it, the way they looked at me didn't change much.

I want to regain my sight.

My understanding of spatial perception has improved, enough to grasp the basic mechanisms.

It reads space as a whole. It also reads anything superimposed on that space, which is why I can perceive the world almost as if through eyes.

But it's different from real eyes. I know because I've seen the world with my own

eyes.

The world seen through eyes and the one felt through spatial perception are different.

If eyes give me ‘my’ perspective to view the world, spatial perception makes me feel nothing more than another part of the backdrop.

I want to see the world through my eyes.

‘But right now, spatial perception is more useful.’

From the perspective of someone who has taken up arms and entered battle, spatial perception is overwhelmingly superior to vision.

Blind spots? There are none in spatial perception. It simply perceives the space around me. Where’s there room for such a thing?

There are moments when one’s vision unavoidably fades in the process of seeing the world. That doesn’t happen with spatial perception…

‘There was that one time, though.’

I remembered how spatial perception was completely blocked in the tower.

My expression crumpled.

The ability that nearly killed its owner on the first day. The ability that caused nothing but trouble since the freshman welcoming party. The treacherous ability that struck me in the back when it mattered most in the tower, and again and again after leaving it!

This ability is flawed, as if a critical screw has come loose.

‘…A defect?’

I was chewing out spatial perception when the word ‘defect’ gave me a sense of unease.

The first day. A day I’d rather not think about, like a nightmare.

My near-death experience was due to the runaway spatial perception. My brain nearly burst from the overload of excessive information.

Whose fault was that?

Putting the reasons aside, the first day's mishap happened because spatial perception was too high-performing, not because it was low-grade.

Had I been able to withstand the burden of spatial perception, I could have fully utilized those nearly omniscient abilities.

If we're talking about faults, then it's not spatial perception that's at fault, it's me. The only thing wrong with spatial perception was that it was too efficient.

Complaining about spatial perception might actually be unjust.

But.

'Isn't that… odd?'

If I had only the ability of spatial perception, I could have conceded my incompetence, but there are two more unique abilities besides spatial perception.

Eight-Directions Charm and Mana Affinity.

Clearly, they were unique abilities acquired alongside spatial perception. But I haven't had trouble managing these two.

Both have excellent performance. Without either one, the growth trajectory I'm on now would have been impossible.

Yet, they never caused me harm due to being too efficient.

Why is it that only spatial perception is like this? They are all abilities given to me equally, so why does only spatial perception have this peculiarity?

'Sigh.'

It's not like I can figure out what's going on with little old me. Once again feeling the futility, I shook my head and shook the water from my damp hair.

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Shio-ram encourages camaraderie among cadets. If you look at the benefits within the academy, there is also a lot of support for social activities.

Thus, many camaraderie events frequently happen in Shio-ram.

In other words, a deluge of minor sub-quests.

Although it's not comparable to the rewards of the main quest, during the first loop, I ventured around tackling various sub-quests.

Interacting with cadet NPCs, triggering sub-quests, and resolving those led to other sub-quests.

Depending on the quest, character affinities rose and fell, and relations with various characters intertwined here and there…

That volatility was quite fun. It was satisfying to see characters with foul dispositions change drastically due to my intervention.

After I graduated from Shio-ram during the first loop and went through hell in a world that had gone to the dogs, from the second loop onwards, I focused on powering up to prevent that.

So, the first loop had its distinct flavor.

I got lost in the past for a moment.

Shaking my head to clear the memories, I operated my smartwatch for the first time in a while.

The most recent record at the top. The first-year general chat room, set up for notices, was flashing.

[Shio-ram 121st Generation General Chat Room (613)]

▸Baek Ahrin: [Notice!] As previously announced, the after-party for the tower entry will be tonight at 6 PM! The location is the Third Banquet Hall! No dress code and attendance is optional! (◍•ᗜ•◍)/” (Today 8:03)

▸Baek Ahrin: [Emphasis!] Fun events and prizes are prepared! We hope to see many of you participate! ʕ•ᴥ•ʔっ (Today 8:04)

…

Baek Ahrin was in charge of the after-party. It made sense since she was the top-ranked cadet and familiar with organizing such social occasions.

‘Should I go?’

I pondered for a moment.

Networking is crucial in this field, and Shio-ram itself affirms it, so there are many opportunities to make connections among cadets.

Casual gatherings like the freshman welcome party and after-parties following big events like this one.

The club activities that will activate from next semester and the mentor system that arranges meetings with other years.

And the festival that happens once a year.

There are quite a few systems that seem unrelated to camaraderie but somehow represent it.

I might not know about other loops, but in the first loop, I frequented various places, managing affinities. Precisely, affinities increased in the process of enjoying sub-quests.

In various ways, the accumulated affinities benefited me.

That’s the story of the game. When a situation arose, I just had to input a bit of text, and that was it.

The real me… I had zero affinity for managing others' affinities…

'But I should probably go, right?'

I may have a flawed personality, but just showing up at such events tends to accrue subtle affinities.

It's embarrassing to call it affinity, but remembering a brief encounter later on is enough.

I made up my mind.

I'll just show my face and come back. The professors advised me to rest well over the weekend, but they probably won't mind if I attend the after-party.

I checked the time.

The after-party was at 6 PM tonight. It's 10 AM now, so there's plenty of time left. I can get some studying done in the meantime.

Rolling around now would be burdensome for me, especially after bleeding from my eyes yesterday, which was frightening.

Patients should obediently listen to doctors. I don't want to lose my eyes either.

With that thought, I was retrieving documents on my smartwatch when my attention drifted to the Origin Egg placed on the shelf.

'When will that thing activate?'

In the original story, if you wait patiently, it opens by itself. The time it took varied each loop, and so did the items it produced.

In the third loop, it was an artifact that allowed for the acquisition of additional unique abilities, while in the eleventh loop, it was the Heavenly Elixir that increased stat growth speed and ceilings.

I could only guess that the Origin Egg spits out the most suitable type of item based on when it was acquired.

What would come out this time then?

In most loops, by this time, a clear direction had been established, but in my current jack-of-all-trades state, I have no idea what it might produce.

Will it be a common elixir? I'd actually prefer that. At least it would be a solid hit.

'Ah… an elixir?'

Mid-thought, I remembered the elixir I had taken from Hong Yeon-hwa. The thought that I should repay my debt. The effects I gained from it.

And then, immediately after taking it, I spewed blood and fainted, experiencing strange hallucinations.

'…If it's an elixir, should I take it?'

I gazed uncertainly at the Origin Egg. If I rashly consume an elixir and end up like last time, who knows what disaster might occur.

Luckily, I was able to get up without any issues last time, but if I'm not careful, I might end up a cold corpse.

Even an elixir that is supposed to be safe caused me trouble. If I consume an unprocessed elixir raw, I cannot ensure my safety.

There's never an easy issue. I sighed deeply and checked the time on my smartwatch.

[PM 4:50]

Alternating between studying and contemplating the future, before I knew it, it was already 5 PM.

'I'll just make an appearance and leave.'

I'll stamp my attendance and return. It's impossible for me to be comfortable there, given my personality.

I changed into my cadet uniform. After fiddling with the Origin Egg a bit, I left the dormitory.

CHAPTER 61
AFTERMATH (2)

Within the grounds of Shio-ram, there are many buildings collectively referred to as 'banquet halls.'

As the name 'banquet hall' suggests, these facilities are constructed for the enjoyment of food and drink, and given their purpose, they are primarily filled with amenities for entertainment.

I arrived at the Third Banquet Hall.

It possesses an exterior reminiscent of an old-fashioned, grand mansion that you might find secluded in the woods, away from the well-trodden paths.

The lush bushes covering the walls didn't look untended or messy; instead, they lent an even more antique charm.

Inside the walls, a verdant green garden unfolded, with colorful fountains spraying water that brightened the dim surroundings.

'The facilities are impressive… '

I fine-tuned my spatial perception. The banquet hall's visage came into view within a moderately extended range. Its sheer size made me tongue-tied.

It was smaller overall compared to the First Banquet Hall, where the freshman welcoming party was held.

The First Banquet Hall is utilized for more significant events, which is why it was constructed with such special attention.

It hosted the welcoming party, and many events inviting external dignitaries are often held there.

Other banquet halls are available for cadets to book, subject to review and approval.

Of course, this doesn't mean the facilities are subpar. From my perspective, both are absurdly luxurious.

I couldn't get a proper look at the First Banquet Hall since my spatial perception was like a radar at that time, but I imagine it has a similar ambiance to this one.

Crossing the garden, I entered through the wide-open main gate.

The interior was spacious and open.

On a broad stage set up along one wall, several cadets were busily moving around, and tables laden with food and drinks were scattered throughout.

I had heard about how the after-party would roughly proceed through the chat room.

Nothing special. Just enjoying good food and drinks, hanging out.

Friends sitting together at each table, eating and drinking.

Those wanting to become friends gather to eat and drink…

Occasionally, some events would take place on stage, showcasing various talents while eating, drinking, and playing…

Even just imagining it was exhausting.

'There are quite a few people.'

Despite my early arrival, the inside was bustling.

Many had arrived early and were chatting with acquaintances. The attire seemed as free-form as announced beforehand.

Unlike me, dressed in my cadet uniform, most were in casual clothes.

As I scanned the area with my spatial perception, lively conversations filled my ears, but other unnecessary noise did not.

I touched my ears, checking their condition.

‘Do I still need to refine it?’

Even after restoring spatial perception, I haven’t discarded my other senses.

If I choose to, I could shut down hearing and touch. I might not go to extremes but can dull them to a level similar to that of the average person.

But I chose not to.

The betrayal I felt entering The Tower of Growth was too fresh; the shock still raw.

Had I not come up with a solution right then, I could have been rendered useless.

That would have been fine if confined to the tower, considering it was part of the trial, but in a real situation, it could have been a disastrous end for me.

To prevent that, I need to analyze why spatial perception malfunctioned and build resistance against it.

Moreover, I should take out insurance, so to speak, to ensure I won’t be incapacitated should it happen again.

Spatial perception has been restored for only a day, but I’ve been consistently adjusting my other senses.

I’ve become quite adept at selectively processing information using my heightened hearing and touch.

Amplifying what’s necessary with enhanced senses, while filtering out what’s not necessary altogether.

It’s a result of applying techniques learned from spatial perception.

The days when Lee Hayul would flinch at a breath on the ear or flop like a fish at a touch are gone.

If I’m put in that situation again… uh… I’ll probably endure.

“Hey, when’s the next entry into The Tower?”

“Dude, you’re high on the thrill. Wake up, it’s at least a couple of months away.”

“I broke through the intermediate strength threshold yesterday.”

“Whoa, crazy gorilla, you already broke through that… But you got wrecked in the tower, right?”

“Dammit…”

Listening to these conversations, it was apparent that most were about the tower entry.

Since this gathering was an after-party for that event, the topic of conversation was more or less set.

Some seemed to be quite friendly, conversing amicably.

Compared to the welcoming party, it looked like many had become closer.

Among them, two male cadets near the entrance appeared particularly friendly.

One cadet had a sturdy build, and the other had a lean, muscular frame.

“If only I hadn’t been wiped out on the first day…”

“That’s your karma. Who told you to pick a fight with a special admissions student on the first day…”

…were they saying?

The one who had been in sync with the disdainful tone trailed off. His speech petered out.

For a moment, his blinking eyes fixated in one direction – my location. His complexion turned pale.

Special admissions student… the cadet who had challenged me turned his head, his shoulders twitching when he saw me.

An awkward silence spread between us.

I had intended to pass by without incident, but we ended up face to face.

After a moment of silence, they tentatively spoke up.

"…Hello?"

"Ah, greetings to you."

Their awkward salutation was met with my own reticence, and I gave a slight nod.

I took a closer look at them with my spatial perception. They weren't familiar to me. Both belonged to a different class of cadets.

'Those guys?'

But it wasn't that I had never met them.

I pondered for a moment, and then the memory surfaced.

If I was correct, I had encountered these two during the chaos of being chased in The Tower of Growth.

I met the burly one on the first day.

Wielding a massive shield and club, he charged at me, so I quietly unleashed a mana blade strike at his ankles, snatched the club away, and smashed his head.

The lean cadet was the following day.

His spear play was remarkably troublesome to counter.

So I committed to engaging him closely and drove my elbow into his solar plexus, caving it in. Unfortunately, I didn't manage to eliminate him.

…This is awkward enough.

Their evasive attitude became understandable. Regardless of the trials faced in the tower, it's hard to just smile and greet someone after such an experience.

After exchanging greetings, I moved on. They seemed uncomfortable and graciously

cleared the way.

As I walked, memories of the tower flooded back.

The recollection of how I indiscriminately slashed at faces with mana blade strikes without restraint.

The memory of gouging out eyes and tearing throats barehanded when I couldn't retrieve my weapons.

And various other memories…

At the time, I was too swarmed to care, but thinking about it now, it was… something.

Was I too violent? Of course, I don't regret using every possible means in a desperate struggle, but…

I sneakily glanced around. There were focused glances coming from all around.

Ever since I entered, an increasing amount of attention was fixed on me, and by now, quite a few glances were directed my way.

While the focus was the same as usual, the emotions behind it seemed to have shifted…

Despite feeling this, I maintained an expressionless facade.

On the day of the welcoming party, my body would have instinctively recoiled, but now it did not. It was a leap of progress.

Of course, I still wanted to get away from it all, but getting this far was something, wasn't it?

As I headed towards an out-of-the-way table…

A chilly gaze swept across my face.

It was like rubbing ice all over my skin. I shuddered involuntarily.

"Oh? Hayul?"

A sense of familiarity enveloped me, confirmed by the unique presence that had become well-known to my ears.

The owner of the presence was Baek Ahrin.

Busy preparing something on stage, she saw me and her eyes widened in surprise, puzzled as to why I was there.

She passed a few words to the cadets nearby and then came towards me with quick steps.

“Are you feeling alright? You were supposed to rest all weekend…”

Her blue eyes blinked, conveying genuine concern. She examined me up and down.

Presumably, Baek Ahrin was worried because she had directly witnessed me spilling blood immediately after exiting the tower. She and Elia were the first to pour healing energy into me.

As I tapped on my smartwatch, a hologram appeared. The projected hologram in mid-air was a welcome sight.

Life would be easier once I got the Confession Necklace.

[I’m fine. After a good sleep, I woke up feeling refreshed.]

The professor who examined me said it wasn’t serious, just a minor hemorrhage.

I too had felt slightly dizzy for a moment, but could quickly regain control over the spatial perception’s burden.

“It’s a relief if you say so, but please let me know if you feel any discomfort, okay?”

[I’ll be careful. I’ll stay quiet and leave soon.]

Looking at the drinks accumulating around, I could easily imagine the cadets partying hard until the wee hours.

The thought of staying up till dawn, drinking and partying… just the thought made me queasy.

I wasn't mad enough to join them to that extent, so the plan was to mingle a bit at the start and then naturally make my exit.

As I was thinking this, Baek Ahrin made a strange expression.

"Quietly…? Hmm…"

"?"

"Oh, it's nothing."

Why was she reacting like that?

As I tilted my head in confusion, Baek Ahrin just muddled her response and made that strange expression, her lips twitching slightly.

"Oh dear, look at the time… I need to get back to preparing. See you in a bit, okay?"

Before I could ask for a reason again, Baek Ahrin turned around. Her sky-blue hair tied in a ponytail swayed as she moved away.

'What's that about?'

What was that expression earlier?

Something feels off…

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I would soon come to understand the reason behind Baek Ahrin's expression.

"Wow, your skin… might I inquire about the products used by your esteemed self?"

'?'

"Do you like board games? Want to come hang at our table? Some from Ipchun class

are gathered here too…”

‘?’

“Recruiting for a live-action drinking game! If you like booze, come over here too. We’re short on people, so everyone’s welcome!”

‘I really don’t want that.’

For some reason, there was a surge of positive interest.

My head spun with the overwhelming attention from all sides.

CHAPTER 62
AFTERMATH (3)

The after-party began modestly.

“Ahem.”

Baek Ahrin, as the top-ranked first-year student who organized this event, made a few brief remarks from the stage, acknowledging everyone’s hard work.

Baek Ahrin’s small cough echoed through the hall via the microphone.

Confirming the attention directed at her, Baek Ahrin nodded and began to speak.

“What need is there for anything grand? You’ve all done well in The Tower of Growth. Eat, drink, and enjoy yourselves! Let’s get started quickly!”

– Clap, clap, clap, clap!

Her brisk toast was met with applause. A few of Baek Ahrin’s closer acquaintances playfully whistled along.

Baek Ahrin grinned and continued.

“The events will start once the atmosphere warms up, so for now, feel free to drink to your heart’s content!”

With that, Baek Ahrin stepped down from the stage.

Simultaneously, lively music started playing from the speakers hung near the ceiling.

Energetic and lively tunes began to flow, prompting activity at the tables.

Most notably, everyone seemed busy opening bottles of alcohol. Most of them were wine-like, contained within bottles.

Corks popped off in various corners of the room.

“Ooh… that smells good.”

A cadet paused to appreciate the rising aroma of the alcohol before beginning to pour it into his glass.

The transparent glass filled up with a red liquid. The beverage, gleaming with the reflected light of the room’s illumination, appeared similar to a soft drink to the naked eye.

Initially, such drinks cannot be identified without sniffing or tasting them.

At a glance, soju and water look remarkably similar, which is why bottles are designed in different shapes and colors or labeled to differentiate them.

Meaning, for someone like me without a sense of smell or taste, distinguishing them is difficult. Unless there’s a difference in viscosity, I can’t tell them apart even after tasting.

‘……’

A wave of revulsion surged through me. My head throbbed, my stomach churning.

Involuntarily, my eyebrows furrowed.

Without a sense of smell or taste, how am I to distinguish them?

Moreover, how do you differentiate when they’re uncorked from such a distance?

I don’t know why. It’s just an instinctive ability to differentiate them.

That’s alcohol. My intuition screams a warning, sensing that a single sip might be lethal. It’s an absurd talent.

And it’s that very ability that induces my aversion.

I suppressed a mild disgust. Thankfully, it was manageable.

As long as I’m not being force-fed, I can handle it.

In a way, it's expected. Modern life inevitably brings one into contact with alcohol and cigarettes.

Even if I don't drink, I'll encounter people who do, smell the alcohol.

I don't smoke, but there are plenty of smokers around, and I can't help but smell the tobacco.

That was the case when I worked at a convenience store. The best-selling items were alcohol and cigarettes.

Customers looking for these products always reeked of their respective odors.

It was a sensation that naturally induced nausea, but back then, I could cope.

Quite unlike when I was with Professor Atra.

'Back then… '

It was an overreaction. No matter how much I may dislike alcohol and cigarettes, I wouldn't faint as long as I wasn't forced to consume them.

However, merely being near Professor Atra had me vomiting and passing out.

It was a clearly abnormal reaction. Despite pondering over it, my mind was too muddled to find a reason.

Now… though it's uncertain, I have some suspicions.

–…!…!!

Lost in thought, the noise around me rose to a tumult.

Using spatial perception, I surveyed the crowd. The atmosphere was generally lively.

There were tables where people enjoyed various types of food, and others where they indulged in different drinks to their hearts' content.

Some tables had set aside food in favor of playing card or board games, gathering people to join.

My table was a small one tucked away in a corner.

There were tables of various sizes in the hall, including tiny ones that could fit only one person in the secluded spots.

Suddenly, I felt thirsty.

I reached out and grabbed a glass placed on the table.

Without needing spatial perception to analyze, my intuition informed me it wasn't alcohol. I drank the cool water, and with it, a slight repulsion washed away.

'It's noisy… '

A little time had passed since the after-party had started.

The area was, in truth, a playground.

Although the environment was similar, the atmosphere was quite different from the composed and orderly freshman welcoming party.

The welcoming party hadn't been too formal either, but since it was hosted by Shio-ram's main academy, there was an unspoken level of decorum.

Not so with this after-party.

This time, the banquet hall was opened upon the request of the cadets.

Moreover, the purpose was different.

While the welcoming party was about 'getting to know each other's faces as we're new,' the after-party was 'let's have fun since we've worked hard.'

Hence, everyone was enjoying themselves without much concern for appearances.

Heroes and Hunters.

While the internet media might spin tales of humanity's shield and craft a certain image, fundamentally, they involve professions that wield power to slay monsters or villains.

It’s not just about killing.

They crawl through dungeons or battlefronts, unknown places where monsters spring forth and inscrutable traps lie in wait.

It’s not uncommon to witness the death of a comrade in such ordeals.

Death is frequent, either for comrades or oneself. Surviving often means living on with some form of disability.

Of course, no profession exists without the risk of death, but heroes and hunters are particularly close to it.

That’s why it’s vital to learn to enjoy these diversions.

Unwinding with fun is a stress reliever.

Even the mandatory lectures emphasize the importance of cultivating habits to manage one’s mental state.

‘…When should I leave?’

I joined the after-party out of obligation to make an appearance, with the freedom to participate.

But once there, I found myself without anything to do. Sitting alone at a secluded table, sipping water, I wondered what I was even doing here.

And besides.

‘Where are Hong Yeon-hwa and Elia? Surely they didn’t skip?’

According to the original story, Hong Yeon-hwa, who enjoyed drinking, and Elia, who had a broad circle of acquaintances among the cadets, would definitely attend such an after-party.

But as I continuously checked with spatial perception, I couldn’t find them.

Could they really not have come? I had assumed they would certainly be here.

Taking the ‘participation is optional’ at face value, there seemed to be a significant number of absentees.

While the physical injuries were healed, mental fatigue lingered, and those who preferred solitude stayed away.

…I’m one of those types.

‘Did I come out for nothing?’

Maybe I should have stayed and trained instead of worrying about making an appearance. I was beginning to regret it.

‘I should just greet people and leave.’

That was the conclusion I reached. Staying here seemed like a waste of time, and having made my presence known was satisfying enough.

I’d just say hello to those I knew… like Atila, Aidan, Nam Yeon-jung, and then head back.

With that thought, I got up from my seat.

– Twitch

Heads turned in my direction from the tables where groups of cadets were enjoying themselves. The sudden flood of attention halted my movements.

The noisy space had suddenly quieted down. I swallowed hard, the sound seeming unusually loud.

‘What’s this?’

Did I do something wrong?

Is getting up now a breach of etiquette? But that couldn’t be right, since other cadets were also moving between tables.

Standing awkwardly, I tried to gauge the room when a few cadets cautiously approached.

There was something off about the feeling. Even though they were just coming over normally, it felt like a carnivorous animal stalking its prey.

Yet without any apparent malice, there was no reason to jump and flee in panic.

“Hello? We came over from the next table~”

‘?’

“If you’re bored, you can join us over here…”

They addressed me with a seemingly hospitable attitude.

Before I knew it, while listening to their smooth chatter, I found myself sitting at a large table.

Oh.

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“After a tumultuous whirlwind…”

Baek Ahrin, sitting opposite me, chuckled as she explained.

“Seeing Hayul sitting alone by the side from the beginning, everyone waited for the moment to pounce as soon as you got up.”

With a gesture like a beast biting into something, Baek Ahrin snickered.

Her teasing manner was clear as I slumped over the table.

In a flash, I had been surrounded by cadets and hauled around from place to place.

One table was set up for board games, while another enthusiastically played some strange card game.

Not just the tables in the hall, but cadets were also enjoying themselves in the adjoining facilities like the ping pong tables, volleyball courts, and bowling alleys.

I strenuously avoided the tables where drinking games and bets were rampant, but the overall fatigue was piling up…

It was just moments ago when Baek Ahrin had rescued me from this circuit of tables and facilities.

“Why didn’t you refuse if you were so tired?”

Baek Ahrin, still smiling, subtly slid a glass towards me. It was filled with ice-cold water. As my stomach was feeling queasy, I gratefully accepted it.

[Thank you.]

“No need to thank me for such a trivial thing. But if you’re going to be grateful, I wish you’d show a bit more appreciation!”

I gulped down the cold water. The chill filled my body, seemingly calming the scorching heat within.

But my head still felt dizzy.

It was a strange sensation, dizzying yet distant, sinking while also oddly exhilarating?

The feeling intensified with time. I hadn’t noticed while being swept up in the whirlwind earlier, but now that I was sitting quietly, it was more pronounced.

– Sniff, sniff

My nose kept twitching. It had been like this for a while, especially when I got close to tables where alcohol flowed.

I didn’t understand why. Annoyed by the itch, I rubbed my nose.

Rubbing the itchy spot brought that peculiar sense of relief. I took the opportunity to rub my face with my sleeve.

Baek Ahrin laughed at my actions. Her clear laughter filled my ears.

It was just laughter, but somehow, I felt displeased.

[Why are you laughing?]

“I didn’t laugh?”

[You just laughed now.]

“No, I didn’t?”

[You did laugh.]

Begrudgingly, I tapped on my smartwatch responding to Baek Ahrin’s unconvincing denials. She tilted her head inquiringly.

“Have you been drinking?”

[I haven’t drunk at all.]

“Hmm?”

Questioned thus, Baek Ahrin examined my face. I inspected myself as well, wondering if there was something wrong.

Apart from my flushed face, there was nothing unusual. It was a bit red, but I’ve had moments when I blushed like this due to warmth.

That’s when it happened. Suddenly, my shoulders jerked.

– Hiccup!

“Oh my?”

My mouth opened involuntarily, and hiccups began. Fearing the curse of silence might strike, I clapped my hands over my mouth in a start.

“You seem a bit tipsy?”

– Shake, shake

At the absurd suggestion, I shook my head vehemently. Me, drink? I would have spit it out on the spot and rolled on the ground.

“Hmm…”

Baek Ahrin, pondering as she tapped the table with her fingers, suddenly stood up.

Then she circled the table and approached me, grabbing my sleeve.

My body was pulled up by the fabric.

As I looked at her quizzically, Baek Ahrin pointed towards the window.

Beyond the window, a walkway lay bathed in a soft light, despite the encroaching darkness outside.

“You seem off, let’s get some fresh air outside.”

[Didn’t I tell you I haven’t drunk?]

“Yes, yes~ Actually, I just want to take a walk myself. Please accompany me~”

With my sleeve in her grasp, I was led out of the banquet hall.

I followed behind Baek Ahrin with quick steps.

CHAPTER 63
CHILL

A chilly night breeze grazed my cheek, the cold seeping into my skin and sending shivers down my spine.

Led by Baek Ahrin, I stepped out into the park beyond the banquet hall.

The sun had already hidden its tracks, leaving a dusky ambiance. The only sources of light nearby were the street lamps and glowing stones embedded along the walkways.

'It's already night.'

Time had slipped away unnoticed while I was being dragged around. How many hours had passed?

My initial plan to say hello and leave lay in ruins.

Baek Ahrin held onto my sleeve as we walked along the park's paths. It was the same park we had crossed upon entering.

"Ah, this is refreshing. Now I can finally breathe."

While I shivered from the cold, Baek Ahrin seemed to revel in it, spreading her arms wide and murmuring contentedly.

"The heating was turned up too high inside. I almost sweated through my clothes. Weren't you hot, Hayul? My head was spinning from the heat."

Eventually, she fanned herself in complaint of the warmth.

For a moment, her behavior shocked me, but then it made sense, considering her constitution.

Truthfully, the inside of the banquet hall was just as warm. Unaware until now, my

body had been toasty all over.

Now that I was outside, catching the cold air, it dawned on me just how warm I had been.

Personally, I prefer warmer conditions, so it wasn't a problem, but Baek Ahrin wasn't the same.

She's optimized for receiving Water Qi and Chill Qi due to her manifestation of Changhae.

The stuffy indoors, like a boiler room, must have been uncomfortable for her in many ways.

Baek Ahrin, grumbling, sat me down on a bench prepared along the walkway and then plopped down next to me.

The lamppost beside the bench illuminated the darkness. The soft glow lent a certain charm to the scene, reminiscent of the emotional pictures that circulate on the internet.

'Sigh… '

We hadn't been outside for long. Perhaps ten minutes at most.

Although it was a brief time, I believed it was enough to cool my warm body with the night air. However, Baek Ahrin still fanned her clothes as if the chill hadn't affected her yet.

[Are you that hot?]

"Yes. I feel like I'm melting with all this built-up heat…"

Baek Ahrin rarely sounded so feeble as she reclined on the bench's backrest.

Was it really that hot inside? I mean, it was warm enough to make my body toasty, but I was unsure if it was to the extent that Baek Ahrin, who harbored Chill Qi, would be affected so.

I've never possessed Changhae, so I couldn't know. Perhaps the closest thing I could

relate to was Gop-hwa.

Gop-hwa specializes in Fire Qi, so users tend to feel warm to the touch.

Thus, Hong Yeon-hwa's embrace was always unusually warm… Why do I keep thinking about this lately?

Suddenly, my mind wandered to strange places, and I hastily shook off the thoughts.

Despite my head spinning, I managed to cut off the bizarre train of thought.

I patted my cheeks and operated the smartwatch. An earlier question I'd forgotten resurfaced.

[Where did Hong Yeon-hwa go?]

"Hong Yeon-hwa couldn't attend because she's managing the strain from Gop-hwa. It looks like it might take a few days."

[Ah.]

The side effect of Gop-hwa. I had seen Hong Yeon-hwa suffering since the last day in the tower and was aware of it.

I nodded at Baek Ahrin's answer, pondering inwardly.

'Is the side effect that severe?'

I recalled the memories of the original work.

From the first to the twelfth iteration.

In the early loops, the butterfly effect a player could cause wasn't significant. At most, they planted seeds that would later grow into massive storms.

The first entry into the tower, especially being in the early stages, made it difficult for a player to cause any significant events.

As a consequence, the early parts tended to flow similarly, and Hong Yeon-hwa underwent changes in Gop-hwa in each loop.

It wasn't a major event.

Apart from the already powerful Gop-hwa becoming even more unbearable, there wasn't much else noteworthy.

'…Will she be alright?'

As I thought about it, worry crept in.

I kept asking Hong Yeon-hwa in the tower if she was alright, but she only replied that there was no problem.

I agreed since it seemed like her condition was simply a bit off… But could the side effect have worsened to the point where she couldn't even attend the after-party?

I didn't know for sure how Hong Yeon-hwa overcame the side effects in the original story.

It was simply summarized that whenever I met Hong Yeon-hwa after the first entry, her Gop-hwa had transformed, making her stronger.

The difficulty of that process was unknown.

[Is Hong Yeon-hwa alright?]

"She says she's fine, but… this side effect seems particularly severe; she wasn't looking too good."

Baek Ahrin leaned back on the bench and shook her head in response.

Her words made my already growing concern peak.

Suddenly, I remembered an entry from the eleventh loop.

In the eleventh loop, when I rummaged through the records of the Gop-hwa clan, there were mentions of users dying from side effects.

That knowledge fueled my anxiety.

"Don't worry too much. Yeon-hwa knows her limits, and if it really becomes

dangerous, she'll call someone from her clan to deal with it."

Baek Ahrin, observing my expression, added her explanation as if to ease my worries.

However, her words didn't fully dispel my concern. Baek Ahrin smiled wryly and continued.

"If you're that worried, why don't you visit her? She'll surely appreciate… that…"

Her sentence suddenly crumbled and scattered into thin air. Baek Ahrin blinked, unable to finish.

"Um… Hmm?"

'?'

Then she made a strange nasal sound as if pondering over something.

I waited patiently, wondering what was on her mind.

After a while, Baek Ahrin broke into a mischievous smile filled with playfulness.

"Hayul."

[Yes?]

She called out to me.

I gave a nod, and she continued with that playful smile.

"Shall we take a picture together?"

It sounded like an important conversation, even though there was no one else around us, she whispered as if sharing a secret.

'Suddenly?'

The request was out of the blue, but I nodded anyway. It seemed she had some thought behind it, interrupted mid-sentence.

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[Why do we have to pose for the picture?]

“Just taking a picture is bland, so we have to pose when we take one.”

A breath tickled my ear, causing my shoulders to shiver. Even with my senses attuned, I reacted.

If my senses had been amplified as in the tower, I would have jumped on the spot.

Through spatial perception, I perceived the information: Baek Ahrin and I, sitting on the bench.

Baek Ahrin had snuggled up close to me, draping an arm over my shoulder.

She had answered my earlier question about why we needed to take a picture like this.

– Send it to Hong Yeon-hwa.

That was the explanation.

Since Hong Yeon-hwa couldn’t join the after-party due to her condition, she had asked Baek Ahrin to keep an eye on me.

Understood the backstory, I nodded inwardly.

Baek Ahrin seemed oddly attentive towards me since my arrival, and knowing this, it made sense.

While feeling a strange response to Hong Yeon-hwa’s concern for me even when she herself was unwell…

I nodded at Baek Ahrin’s suggestion to send a photo to show I was being well looked after, which was the situation just moments ago.

“Okay, now I’m taking the picture~”

At Baek Ahrin’s sign, I straightened up.

– Click!

Baek Ahrin’s smartwatch activated a hologram.

The distinctive camera shutter sounded, and a hologram captured the image of Baek Ahrin and me.

“Done!”

Baek Ahrin manipulated her smartwatch, apparently sending the photo to Hong Yeon-hwa.

– Ding!

Shortly after, an alarm sounded. It seems the photo was sent successfully.

‘Maybe it’s time to leave.’

The photo was taken, and my body’s warmth had subsided significantly. My head was cooling down, making it easier to think.

Feeling better now, I was about to get up when…

– Ding!

– Ding! Ding! Ding! Ding! Ding!

Baek Ahrin’s smartwatch erupted into incessant alarms. The sudden barrage startled me, and I turned my head.

“Ahahaha!”

Unconcerned, Baek Ahrin burst into clear laughter. It was a loud, joyful sound that spread in all directions.

[Baek Ahrin?]

“Hehe, ah… Yes, it’s nothing. Yeon-hwa says thank you for the photo.”

Baek Ahrin, wiping tears from her eyes, chuckled.

I wondered if a thank you typically involved sending so many messages, but since she said so, I had nothing more to say.

I could have checked the message history if I wanted, but I pressed down my curiosity for the sake of privacy.

I nodded with a perplexed look.

‘What’s that about… ’

I wasn’t sure what was going on, but Baek Ahrin seemed to be thoroughly enjoying herself. She was still cackling at the hologram.

This behavior was rarely seen from the typically gentle Baek Ahrin.

People are complex. They can’t always show the same face or be easily categorized.

Humans aren’t NPCs with predefined settings.

Baek Ahrin who stood by the player’s side until the end in the doomed world of the first loop.

Baek Ahrin who stabbed the player in the back in the eighth loop.

Baek Ahrin who disliked the heat and had an affinity for peculiar old candies.

Just game knowledge. A world that aligns with the knowledge of a game.

Me, with abilities written like a game character.

‘…… ’

Perhaps it was the night, but various thoughts were crossing my mind. This must be what they call late-night musings.

My emotions were a complicated mix.

CHAPTER 64
VISITING THE SICK (1)

The after-party proceeded without any issues.

Cadets, finding their clique, gathered to eat, drink, and enjoy the fleeting freedom.

As the pre-announced event time approached, the dispersed cadets began to converge on the first floor of the banquet hall.

It was around this time that I returned to the banquet hall after my walk.

As soon as I entered, I quickly took a seat at a table set aside to avoid being caught by the swarming glances.

Cadets who were approaching me in strides scattered with looks of disappointment. I exhaled a sigh of relief. It was a close call; I almost fell into their snare again.

Shortly after, the main event began.

Though it was announced as an event, there was nothing particularly special.

It was a talent show, the kind one might see on a school trip or at a university MT, at least based on what I'd seen on the internet since I had never been on a school trip or to university.

The proceedings were more or less the same.

The host sparked enthusiasm with witty banter, and several cadets took to the stage to flaunt their skills, eliciting cheers from the audience.

The difference lay in the actions of the cadets on stage.

In the world I was familiar with, performances would typically include singing, dancing, and maybe some magic.

Cheers erupted as a female cadet started dancing after a few words. Given their superhuman physical abilities, her dance skills were extraordinary.

She performed a very dynamic and fast-paced dance flawlessly without a hitch.

Up to this point, there were no issues. It was within the realm of understanding for ordinary common sense.

– Whoosh!

It was after that where the norms of the previous world ceased to apply.

Flames sprouted from the cadet's fingertips. While any ordinary person would have panicked and shaken off the fire, the cadet moved unphased.

The flame swayed, tracing red paths that followed her smooth yet intense movements.

The flame didn't just sit idly. It moved as if it had its own consciousness, weaving around the cadet's focus.

It was a sight like something out of myth: a dancer commanding fire as she moved.

'…… '

It was an unusual scene in many ways.

These actions were fed to me through spatial perception. Analyzing each action through spatial perception felt like accruing unexpected experience points.

The unique talents continued.

One cadet manipulated water levitating in the air to mimic various figures and buildings with impressive quality, while another used psychokinesis to control puppetry for a one-person play.

All of these were sights unseen in the previous world.

They also served as a bountiful source of experience points. Through spatial perception, I gained much by analyzing such talents.

Experiencing not only the manipulation of magic but also the physical changes and the emergence of unique abilities made the experience quite sweet.

So, I set aside any thoughts of leaving and sat quietly at a table set aside, observing the talent show.

There was also a moment when the host randomly called out pre-distributed numbers to the participating cadets, bringing them up for a brief song.

Aside from a peculiar atmosphere when I was selected, the event went on without a hitch.

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Thus, the after-party successfully came to a close. There were no incidents, and most cadets left the festivities feeling satisfied.

Unlike the freshman welcoming party, which ended on a strange note due to my accidental fainting, this time everything from start to finish went smoothly.

After the event and having enjoyed themselves thoroughly, some cadets returned home while others remained in the banquet hall and partied until dawn.

The day after the after-party.

Sitting on my bed, I scrolled through the group chat on my smartwatch and nodded.

The suffering of the cadets groaning from hangovers was being reported live. I couldn't understand why they'd willingly drink themselves into such a state.

It was an ordinary red-letter Sunday morning.

Though I should have resisted the lure of sleep and forced myself up for the weekend, today, I woke up automatically with a clear mind.

I had been in this state since yesterday, precisely since Baek Ahrin informed me

about Hong Yeon-hwa's condition.

'Will she be okay?'

She couldn't attend the after-party because of the side effects of Gop-hwa.

Hong Yeon-hwa, who seemed always healthy and unbreakable, missed the event due to illness.

Well-known amongst the cadets as a drinker, she had missed such a large drinking event…

My thoughts kept drifting in that direction.

The transformation of Gop-hwa. The change that comes every loop for Hong Yeon-hwa, the side effect that she always overcame easily.

So I hadn't thought much of it.

In the original work's timeline, she'd be back in top form in a day or two.

But the news of Hong Yeon-hwa being too ill to attend the event weighed heavily on my heart.

I kept being haunted by the sight of Hong Yeon-hwa looking drained on the last day of entering the tower. My thoughts became restless.

My mind would focus on something for a moment, then veer off course.

'……'

After hearing from Baek Ahrin… That is, after Baek Ahrin sent what seemed like a proof-of-life photo, I contacted Hong Yeon-hwa.

It must have been around 9 PM.

I hesitated for a while before sending the message, wondering if it was too late, worrying it might be a nuisance.

The message asked if she was feeling alright.

After sending it, the incessant ringing of Baek Ahrin's smartwatch stopped, and a reply arrived simultaneously.

▸Hong Yeon-hwa: Thanks for worrying about me. I'm okay. (Yesterday 20:57)

▸Hong Yeon-hwa: It's something most with Gop-hwa go through. I'll be fine in a few days, so don't worry. (Yesterday 20:58)

▸Hong Yeon-hwa: What did Ahrin do this time…? (Yesterday 21:01)

Her body is okay. She's thankful for the concern. She'll be fine soon, so don't worry. Though the responses were formal, they warmed my heart.

I didn't understand her question about what had been done to her, but the tone seemed to be more concerned about me, even though she was the one in pain.

After briefly reviewing the message history, I nodded and got up.

It was the first time in my life I decided to visit someone who was sick.

Visiting the sick.

To visit someone hospitalized to check on their condition and offer comfort.

I had never gone on a sick visit in my life.

To be precise, there were times when people visited me, but I had never done so myself.

Thanks to an almost non-existent social circle in the previous world, there was no one to visit.

No injured acquaintances. Hence, naturally, no sick visits.

My only close contact was an internet friend.

'I wonder how they're doing… '

As I dressed for the visit, thoughts of my former world's connection surfaced.

The internet friend who went by the nickname Agapansus.

Whenever I was bored and struck up a conversation, responses came sharp and quick, from a person as much of a hermit as me.

Most of my communication skills were honed from my conversations with Agapansus, to say the least.

Also, a person I won't likely meet again as returning to the original world was not something I was considering.

'…They should be fine.'

From what I heard, they seemed to be financially stable. Not in a precarious position that warrants my worry, so they're probably living well even now.

A person who was practically living on the internet 24/7. With plenty of other internet friends, they won't be lonely.

My thoughts briefly wandered. I shook them off and finished dressing.

Unlike the previous world, I now had a few connections.

Especially with Hong Yeon-hwa, I believed we shared a relatively close bond.

…Even though it's mostly been me receiving help from her.

Hong Yeon-hwa is said to be ill. I couldn't shake off the unease, and I wanted to see her and ask after her wellbeing in person.

Of course, I didn't go right away.

Even with no experience in visiting the sick, I knew that showing up unannounced would be rude.

So, while asking about her wellbeing in yesterday's message, I also subtly broached the topic of a sick visit.

▸Me: If it's okay with you, may I visit you sometime tomorrow…? (Yesterday 21:06:11)

▸Hong Yeon-hwa: Yes. (Yesterday 21:06:12)

I had received an affirmative response. With permission granted, there was no need to hesitate.

'…Should I go?'

I had gathered all my clothes and was about to leave the dorm when a sudden thought stopped me in my tracks.

Did I misread her politeness as consent due to my lack of social awareness?

Surely with Hong Yeon-hwa and me, we're close enough for a sick visit…? I'm not the only one who considers us friends, right?

After a brief hesitation, I brushed aside the uneasy thoughts.

If I stayed at home, I'd just keep repeating these thoughts.

I quickly got dressed, entered the living room, and picked up the gift I had prepared.

I had already bought wrapping paper on the way yesterday.

After looking up etiquette for sick visits and learning that it's good to bring a gift, I prepared one, thinking it'd be odd to visit empty-handed.

Of course, for Hong Yeon-hwa, it might seem trivial… But isn't it the thought that counts with gifts?

I double-checked the gift and then opened the door to step outside.

CHAPTER 65
VISITING THE SICK (2)

I kicked open the door with determination, but I didn't have to walk very far.

Like me, Hong Yeon-hwa had also opted not to take up residence in a house, but instead lived in the dormitory.

The best-performing student from each year could choose between a penthouse at the top of the dormitory and a house, and Hong Yeon-hwa had chosen the penthouse.

The dormitory buildings stretched out in a 4×2 formation, so it was only a short walk of a few minutes to reach her place.

Within the range of my spatial perception, I could have easily checked on Hong Yeon-hwa's well-being, but…

'That's a bit… '

It would prick my conscience.

Even now, I sometimes make mistakes in control and pull in information from unexpected places. Despite the ongoing improvement in my spatial perception skills.

It took me roughly five minutes to walk from my dormitory to the main hall of Hong Yeon-hwa's building.

I entered the interior of the building using my smartwatch for authentication. The exterior and facilities were identical to my dormitory.

While waiting for the elevator, I exchanged greetings with a few cadets.

I reciprocated their advance greetings, and soon the elevator arrived.

The interaction didn't end there; I chatted with those who rode the elevator with me. Their attitudes were noticeably friendlier than before.

‘Is it the proof that makes the difference?’

The special admission student.

Brought in by the Principal, I had potential, but my unusual appearance had raised many questions.

I’d have had doubts too. After all, being a hero entails pushing one’s body to the limit, and here I was, initially fragile and without sight or voice…

Now, I’ve improved physically. My spatial perception evolved enough to feel guilty for anyone calling me blind…

As for being mute… there were indeed some difficulties. Communicating via hologram in emergencies is inconvenient in many ways.

And though unlikely, if I found myself in a situation without hologram access, my ability to communicate would be effectively blocked…

‘Maybe the “Confession Necklace” would solve this?’

The Confession Necklace.

It’s considered a mid-to-low-grade artifact by the Association’s standards.

If you just look at the ability to blurt out the wearer’s innermost thoughts, it’s excellent for interrogation.

But the more skilled you become, the more you can control what you confess, and the fact that it imprints on the first user makes it a double-edged artifact.

In the original work, I deemed it useless and auctioned it off. There were other, better artifacts to carry around.

There were enough other ways to interrogate enemies, after all.

But in my current situation, nothing is more urgently needed than the Confession Necklace.

The ability to filter inner thoughts and the imprinting effect? That would be perfect.

Healthy body, perception better than sight, and a necklace that speaks for me…

With that necklace in hand, I'd truly transcend the limitations of disability. Then, I could genuinely assert to those around me that I feel no inconvenience whatsoever.

– Ding!

While imagining an easy future, the elevator doors opened, revealing a corridor laid with red carpet.

Decorations on either side of the corridor were so opulent they suggested they shouldn't be touched carelessly.

I examined the decor with a wry expression and moved forward. Even walking on the luxurious carpet felt somewhat improper.

Of course, the dormitory facilities below were astonishingly excellent by my standards, but this place seemed to be on another level entirely.

It could pass for a magnate's mansion. Just the pottery alone seemed to scream wealth.

I stood before a door at the end of the corridor.

The penthouse on the top floor. I took a breath, letting go of some tension, and pressed the doorbell beside the door.

Soon someone would…

– Wheeze

"?"

Almost immediately after pressing the doorbell, the door opened.

In the doorway stood a woman dressed inappropriately for the era. They called it a maid's outfit, right?

"Good day. I am Ariel Tryden, in charge of guarding Miss Hong Yeon-hwa."

Her half-closed black eyes blinked, and then she bowed politely.

I bowed in return.

[Hello.]

“Miss is inside. If it’s not too much trouble, may I show you in?”

[Yes, please.]

“Very well, I’ll lead the way.”

After a courteous exchange, Ariel turned her back.

Following her inside, I scanned her with my spatial perception.

Black hair and black eyes. Half-closed eyes and a maid outfit that seemed to be a modernized variant.

‘Ariel Tryden.’

This was my first time seeing her in person, but I knew of her from the original story.

She was a woman who served as both Hong Yeon-hwa’s guardian and attendant, invariably entangled in the narrative whenever Hong Yeon-hwa was involved.

As you’d expect from someone tasked with guarding the heir of the Gop-hwa clan, Ariel was no ordinary talent.

She had been a top-tier hunter in her active days.

It was Ariel, not Hong Yeon-hwa, who had incessantly pursued me during the eleventh loop. That time, her persistence had been quite the annoyance.

“Here we are, sir.”

We walked briefly through the spacious interior.

Ariel stopped beside a door and bowed again.

It seemed this was Hong Yeon-hwa's room. I was about to nod… Huh?

[Did you just say "sir"?]

"Oh, my mistake. Lee Hayul. Here we are."

She corrected herself with a mechanical tone and opened the door.

'…… '

I was receiving some rather special treatment.

It was apparent from her manner. Something was off about the way she was treating me as just a guest.

With a perplexed expression, I stepped into the room.

The space inside was quite large.

The furniture filling the room was all high-end, and one wall was made entirely of glass, letting in ample sunlight.

Resting against the headboard of a bed bathed in light was Hong Yeon-hwa.

She seemed anxious as she glowered at a hologram, but upon sensing my deliberate arrival, she turned her head.

"Ah! You came?"

Her anxious expression brightened. Relieved by her overt happiness, I closed the distance between us.

Meanwhile, I scrutinized Hong Yeon-hwa's condition through spatial perception. I skipped over the external physique and went straight to checking her mana state.

'Hmm… '

Her mana was twisted and entangled in a disorderly fashion. Such a state would indeed be a significant hindrance to utilizing mana.

Physically, she seemed to be fine. Of course, if mana issues worsened, it would affect the body, but it hadn't reached that level yet.

As Hong Yeon-hwa called me closer, I moved to her side.

I brought over a chair and sat down beside the bed. From what I could see, Hong Yeon-hwa didn't seem too ill, which eased my mind a bit.

"Are you hurting anywhere? You seemed in pain when we left the tower."

[Just like the text I sent the other day, there are no major issues. But I'm more worried about you, Hong Yeon-hwa. Are you really okay?]

"Yeah. There's no need to worry. At most, I'm just feeling a bit weak, nothing else unusual. I'll naturally recover in a few days."

I was frankly baffled by Hong Yeon-hwa's initial response.

She was the one who couldn't attend the after-party due to illness, the one who had been lying in bed, so why was I the one receiving concern?

"How was the after-party yesterday? Anything special happen?"

'Ah, that's where it began.'

Hong Yeon-hwa asked with genuine curiosity, having missed the after-party herself.

I nodded keenly and tapped away on my smartwatch, recounting my experiences at the after-party.

I wanted to alleviate some of Hong Yeon-hwa's regret for not being able to attend.

The strange looks when I first entered, the variety on the tables, the spacious and well-facilitated banquet hall.

Getting swept up by cadets after standing up from the side table due to unfamiliarity with the etiquette.

Being tossed around in a daze until Baek Ahrin rescued me…

“That darn… Ahem! Baek Ahrin didn’t do anything bad to you, did she?”

[Bad things?]

I asked with a puzzled tilt of the head, and Hong Yeon-hwa briefly examined my expression before turning away as if to say it was nothing.

She peppered me with questions whenever curiosity struck her during the conversation.

There were quite a few questions about Baek Ahrin, suggesting that despite their bickering, they truly were close.

“Oh, right. I’ve been wondering about that since earlier, what’s that?”

The conversation turned to the after-party as it was nearing its end.

Hong Yeon-hwa pointed to the gift envelope placed on a nearby table. Though she pretended otherwise, clear anticipation shone in her eyes.

‘Oh… ’

My fingers, which had been busily tapping on the smartwatch, came to an abrupt halt.

I hesitated for a moment, then clutched the gift envelope close to my chest.

To say I had brought it as a sick visit gift seemed… inadequate.

The extravagance of the facilities I had seen on my way here only reinforced that feeling.

The art-filled corridors, the carpet that seemed too luxurious to step on.

The dormitory that seemed more like a plaza than a home and the dazzlingly bright furniture.

Compared to all of Hong Yeon-hwa’s luxurious surroundings, my gift seemed pitifully humble.

“Huh? Huh? What’s that?”

Hong Yeon-hwa’s voice, tinged with excitement, made me gulp. It seemed she had guessed the purpose of my visit.

Should I hand it over? Or should I pretend at this point that I didn’t bring a gift? No, that would disappoint her expectant eyes, and I couldn’t bear that. But handing over something so modest might also lead to disappointment…

In a brief moment, dozens of thoughts and responses raced through my mind. I was surprised at my own speed of thought.

‘……’

Her expectant gaze pierced me. My body moved on its own. With trembling hands, I timidly offered the gift.

The pre-written message appeared in the hologram.

[I brought this as a gift for your sick visit.]

“Wow! Thank you so much…! I’ll treasure this!”

The concealed anticipation burst forth. Hong Yeon-hwa’s eyes sparkled as she reached out her hand.

As she attempted to take the gift, I involuntarily gripped it tightly, but the difference in our strength was evident. Hong Yeon-hwa effortlessly snatched the gift from me.

I swallowed the sigh that was about to burst from my empty hand. The habit of preventing the “Curse of Silence” was becoming ingrained.

“Can I open it now?”

[Yes.]

No sooner had I responded than Hong Yeon-hwa’s hands began to work. Although she seemed hasty, she was careful with every fold of the wrapping paper as she dismantled it.

Seeing her treat my gift with such care warmed my heart, yet the thought that her anticipation might turn into disappointment made it thud wildly.

Finally, the gift was unwrapped.

Amidst the pounding of my heart, the contents of the gift slipped from Hong Yeon-hwa's grasp onto the bedspread.

"A scarf?"

Hong Yeon-hwa's eyes settled on the gift.

The identity of the gift was a scarf. A plain red scarf, devoid of any special adornments.

[I heard that it's important for Gop-hwa users to regulate their body temperature.]

Those who possess Gop-hwa have bodies adapted to hold fire energy. Their bodies grow to contain fire, and their mana takes on fiery characteristics.

As a result, Gop-hwa users typically have very high body temperatures. But that's not always the case.

Like Hong Yeon-hwa now, there are times when body temperature can drop rapidly due to various reasons.

It's like the desert that's hot during the day but cold at night.

There have been cases where a Gop-hwa user's body temperature plummets without end once it starts to fall.

Hong Yeon-hwa's eyes flickered. She was absentmindedly fiddling with the scarf when she turned her gaze towards me.

I swallowed nervously and waited for her answer.

Within the data felt through spatial perception, I focused, anxious about the words to follow.

"Really, really thank you…! I will cherish it!"

The answer, filled with emotion, made my heart race, but this time out of joy, not tension.

While I relaxed, Hong Yeon-hwa joyously examined the scarf from every angle.

I scrutinized her closely, wondering if she was acting for my sake, but there was no sign of pretense.

'That's a relief… '

The unease in my chest melted away. I now understood why people give gifts. Seeing the recipient so happy made me genuinely smile.

"It's really soft… Where did you buy this?"

Hong Yeon-hwa marveled, feeling the texture of the scarf. She seemed to like how it felt in her grip.

I had paid extra attention to the texture. I hadn't slept all night because of it.

After taking a sip of the beverage Ariel brought me, I tapped on my smartwatch.

[I made it myself.]

"Ah. Hayul made it… What?"

Hong Yeon-hwa stopped mid-sentence and whipped her head around. Her wide eyes made my body twitch.

Wondering if I had said something wrong, I checked the hologram. There was nothing off.

Concerned that it might have appeared differently from Hong Yeon-hwa's perspective, I tapped the smartwatch again.

[I made it myself.]

"……"

This time, no answer came.

She just stared blankly at me.

…Why is she reacting like this?

CHAPTER 66
WARMTH

[I made it myself.]

Lee Hayul cocked his head and displayed the hologram, as if questioning what could possibly be wrong with what he had written.

Did Hong Yeon-hwa truly not understand what was wrong? Or more precisely, was she unaware of which part was shocking?

Hong Yeon-hwa blinked blankly for a moment before looking down.

The long, stretched-out scarf caught her eye. The soft texture firmly grasped in her hand was palpable.

It was a red scarf. She lifted it slightly and held it up against her nape.

'This is… '

There are many kinds of red in the world. They may seem similar, but each red is distinctly different.

The red of the scarf was a shade similar to the glimpse of her hair in her peripheral vision.

Not just simply red but similar enough to feel a resemblance when placed alongside.

At first, it seemed coincidental, but upon closer inspection, the colors were strikingly alike.

Hong Yeon-hwa turned her gaze away from the scarf and looked up.

The moment she caught sight of Lee Hayul's smiling face, it felt as if the world lit up like the morning sun pouring in through the window.

‘So cute.’

How could his smile be so blissfully pure? He was grinning foolishly, seemingly overjoyed.

Hong Yeon-hwa tried to calm her fluttering heart and asked,

“Thank you… You really made this yourself?”

[Yes.]

“When did you make it?”

[I made it yesterday.]

“Yesterday…? Are you talking about the day of the after-party?”

[Yes.]

Hong Yeon-hwa was lost in thought.

The time when Lee Hayul had asked if he could visit her was during the after-party. In other words, it was late at night when he had inquired.

Then when did he prepare this sick visit gift?

Before he knew she had missed the after-party that morning?

Before he even knew if she would allow a sick visit?

Or,

After getting her permission, did he start making it during the late hours following the after-party?

Hong Yeon-hwa subtly scanned Lee Hayul’s face. His foolishly beaming face. Cute…

‘No, that’s not the point.’

The shadows under his eyes caught her attention more than anything. Upon closer

inspection, his entire face seemed more tired than before.

She glanced down at his hands. Both arms bore the marks of numerous trainings. The hands were telling, scarred countless times from ripping and healing.

And then she noticed the fresh scars, likely not long healed.

As someone who had undergone countless battles, she could recognize them.

They were not the wounds from swinging a sword or spear.

Not the kind from repeated punches. They looked more like injuries from needles or tiny scissors.

'……'

The scarf laying in her hand felt incredibly heavy.

Seeing Lee Hayul's joyous smile only intensified that feeling. He had given her a scarf he personally, painstakingly knitted.

And when she thanked him, he beamed with such happiness.

He looked as if he owned the world, not having received a gift but having given one.

Suddenly, her heart resonated with a different kind of pulse. The sensation was foreign to her weakened state.

It was guilt.

Hong Yeon-hwa possessed Gop-hwa, a truly troublesome ability.

The primary advantage of Gop-hwa was always its output.

Whether it was through the expansion abilities like Blooming, Evolution, and Holy Fire, the defining strength of Gop-hwa was its unparalleled output.

The problem was that this very output could harm its user so grievously.

Malfunctioning output could burn the owner alive, a maddening trait.

And it didn’t end there.

This exasperating Gop-hwa, with its side effects, would occasionally impose trials upon its owner.

It seems ludicrous for an ability to bring about a trial, but it’s a rite of passage for those growing with Gop-hwa.

The nature of these trials varied, but the first one was always the same.

It provoked the owner’s guilt.

It would unceremoniously dredge up memories from the past.

Mistakes made, pain inflicted on others, calamities caused by their own blunders.

From trivial to monumental.

It also tormented the user with illusions, an utterly dismal trial.

Hong Yeon-hwa was no exception.

Memories flickered past her. From her early steps as a toddler, each memory proceeded in turn.

Hong Yeon-hwa was impulsive and harsh with her words, but inherently, she leaned towards good nature.

She often threw punches, but there were always reasons behind those situations. In simple terms, those on the receiving end had it coming.

Sometimes she destroyed facilities? Those were minor mishaps that could be settled with personal funds.

Beyond that, memories that instilled guilt in her were limited to the horrors she witnessed while roaming the edges of the wilderness with family elders.

These were the extents of her mishaps.

With her inherent mental strength and resilience, she could easily overcome such

trifling trials within days.

– Ah, ah, aah—!

That would have been the case up until a month ago.

Lee Hayul's face, beaming with gratitude for receiving the gift, overlaid with his face screaming in agony amidst the flames.

The flames surged, and Hong Yeon-hwa's complexion turned ashen.

– Ah, agh…!

Contorted with pain. His right arm engulfed in flames. Rolling on the ground to smother the fire, yet the flames raged on, opposing his efforts.

She had no memory of witnessing such a scene. It must be an illusion then.

…Is it an illusion?

Reality overlapped with the illusion.

"…!…?!"

Lee Hayul flapped his hands in dismay, sensing Hong Yeon-hwa's distress, not knowing what to do.

His right arm, covered in a sleeve, flailed. The scars likely beneath were almost visible.

After seeing those scars in the infirmary, Hong Yeon-hwa was convinced that he was a victim of Gop-hwa.

Such scars could only be left by Gop-hwa. She had heard of the orphanage he belonged to being consumed by fire.

Since then, she harbored guilt.

At one time, he was an overt victim of her family's actions. His physical disabilities might even be the result of Gop-hwa's influence.

Recently, another possibility came to mind.

Lee Hayul had used Gop-hwa.

Whether due to control issues or a different problem, the manifestation was limited to his right arm, but it was unmistakably Gop-hwa.

The possibility that he was a blood relative from her family emerged.

But that didn't exempt him from the guilt.

Gop-hwa is an ability passed through bloodlines.

Thus, even distant relatives with a drop of the founder's blood are recorded in the family registry.

However, tracking does not extend to those who are not formally part of the family.

The illusion shifted. Once again, it was a scene Hong Yeon-hwa had never encountered.

The interiors of a building so dilapidated, calling it a slum would be generous.

A young Lee Hayul was repeatedly beaten by less-than-human brutes.

An affection-starved child treated like an emotional trash can, subjected to parental curses and abuse.

Revulsion surged within her. She wanted to shatter those heads on the spot, tear those hands to shreds.

The violent urge grew. It was the perfect kindling for Gop-hwa's flames.

Just as the unthinkable was about to happen, someone's grip on her shoulders gently rocked her body.

The soft touch of the bed against her back. The sweet scent that hovered close.

Waking up, the illusion faded and reality came into focus.

"…!…!?…!!"

In the illusion, Lee Hayul, who was dying with his stomach slit open, now cautiously climbed onto the bed and gently shook her awake.

Her throat constricted. It was difficult to breathe, as if a weight sat upon her chest.

Hong Yeon-hwa looked at Lee Hayul with trembling eyes.

She couldn't discern if what she just witnessed was a mere hallucination or a real memory. Her instincts whispered it was closer to reality.

She couldn't think beyond that.

Under normal circumstances, Hong Yeon-hwa might have regained her composure.

But.

Amplified emotions due to Gop-hwa, side effects, the replay of hallucinations, intuition whispering it was reality.

All of it narrowed her vision and clouded her judgment.

Crushed by guilt, she struggled to breathe.

– Whoosh!

Her inner Gop-hwa flared up. The flames, long suppressed, swelled in size. Feeding on her current emotions, Gop-hwa ebbed ferociously.

The wild flames spread in all directions. Just as they threatened to engulf the mountains of guilt.

"…!"

Lee Hayul, who had been restless, suddenly wrapped his arms around Hong Yeon-hwa.

The warmth stilled Hong Yeon-hwa's trembling body. The spreading Gop-hwa ceased along with her.

The flickering illusion vanished instantly, as if waking from a dream.

Then, a gentle hand landed on her head, awkwardly yet tenderly stroking her hair.

The warmth and emotion in the touch seeped from her head into her body, making her feel as if she would melt.

“Ah…”

A gasp escaped her. The overwhelming guilt began to dissipate, and the exaggerated emotions washed away.

Her focus steadied. The fog clouding her mind slowly lifted, returning to its rightful place.

When she came to her senses, she found herself holding Lee Hayul close, breathing heavily.

The breath she felt against her body made her shudder. Relaxed, the person nestled in her arms carefully lifted his head.

[Are you alright? Should I call Ariel?]

The hologram popped up in a rush, dripping with concern.

“Uh…”

So much had happened in a brief moment. Hong Yeon-hwa paused to reflect on the recent events.

To put it simply, she had nearly met her demise.

She was on the verge of being consumed by Gop-hwa.

The illusion Gop-hwa conjured nearly devoured her, and she almost lost control.

The resultant outcome? It was obviously dreadful.

The realization sent a chill down her spine. She could have burned to death right then and there.

Swallowing hard, Hong Yeon-hwa repeatedly embraced Lee Hayul for both physical and mental stability.

As he settled into her arms, the chill that had been creeping over her warmed once again.

“Whew…”

After holding him for a while, the dizzying sensations gradually subsided.

Hong Yeon-hwa peeked down at her embrace. Lee Hayul had ceased struggling and surrendered his body willingly.

As she stroked his hair, she became lost in thought.

“……”

Gop-hwa simmered down. The hallucinations dissipated, and the flames flickering in all directions subsided.

Yet the fundamental cause remained unresolved.

The sensation she dismissively called a trial was still there, and the guilt that nearly triggered her outburst was still present.

If left unaddressed, it was merely delaying a ticking time bomb.

That recent surge of guilt needed to be resolved somehow.

With that resolve, fear rippled through her. The thought of him being disappointed after hearing her story was terrifying.

Yet it couldn’t be ignored. She had an inkling that this was a pivotal moment.

Hiding this issue from him again out of fear would not yield a favorable outcome.

“Hayul. I have something to say.”

And so, she revealed the truth.

The truth that, regardless of which hypothesis was correct, her family was responsible.

She confided the truth while gently patting the person in her embrace.

"?"

Lee Hayul tilted his head, puzzled.

* * *

"…So that's what happened."

What's he talking about?

Lee Hayul's head tilted involuntarily at Hong Yeon-hwa's lengthy explanation.

He didn't understand why she was looking at him with such tense anticipation after finishing her story.

Nor did he understand the previous situation.

He felt fluffy and happy when she accepted the scarf with joy at first.

Then, suddenly, she seemed to be deep in thought before her complexion turned deathly pale, and when he asked what was wrong, she broke down in sobs and collapsed.

He nearly lost his mind. The patient who was supposed to be resting just showed such a reaction that he honestly thought he was going crazy.

Before calling Ariel, who was outside, he embraced her to check her condition, and for some reason, she returned to normal.

It seemed to have the same effect when he was held and petted before.

Grateful for the apparent success, he was about to call Ariel when…

Suddenly, he was embraced and petted, then heard a long, serious story.

‘What is he saying?’

The story made his head tilt.

What? The scars on my arm are from Gop-hwa? Or that I might be a member of the Gop-hwa family?

From the standpoint of someone who remembered the previous world, it was nonsense, but when thinking of this world’s Lee Hayul, it was a story he didn’t fully know.

What on earth is going on?

He just handed over a scarf and now faced this unexpected predicament.

But at least one thing became clear from the recent story.

He didn’t quite understand why she felt so crushed by guilt.

She seemed to view the scar as an injury from Gop-hwa, thinking he had been abandoned by her family and struggled to live.

His mind was cluttered. He, too, felt dizzy.

That issue would have to wait. For now, the priority was to comfort Hong Yeon-hwa, who seemed almost dead with anxiety.

‘Um… ’

The reason Hong Yeon-hwa was so anxious and crushed by guilt…

Because she thought the scar was made by Gop-hwa, that I was a blood relative abandoned in an orphanage…

‘Ah. I don’t know.’

Casting all thoughts aside, he tapped on the smartwatch.

[I don’t fully understand, but may I ask a few questions?]

“Yes. Ask me anything.”

Hong Yeon-hwa swallowed and replied.

He nodded and displayed the hologram again.

[Is the scar on my arm from Gop-hwa?]

“…Yes, it’s definitely from Gop-hwa. I’m certain of that.”

[Did you inflict this wound on me, Hong Yeon-hwa?]

“No.”

[Did you intentionally torment me, Hong Yeon-hwa?]

“No…! Absolutely not…!”

[Then it’s alright.]

“…Huh?”

End of questions.

After he stopped the questioning, Hong Yeon-hwa’s tense expression blanked out. The rare sight made him chuckle softly.

“…No, that’s not the whole story. This is…”

Hong Yeon-hwa stammered, attempting to continue.

It was bothersome. He deliberately embraced himself in Hong Yeon-hwa’s arms. Her body tensed.

‘…Wow.’

This was nearly the first time he deliberately sought comfort, and it was embarrassingly intense.

But it seemed the only way to stop her from talking now was to hold her like this.

He endured the embarrassment and buried his face in her embrace.

The cozy sensation enveloped him, and he felt an airy lightness.

“Uh-oh…”

Through spatial perception, Hong Yeon-hwa seemed perplexed.

As she held him, she seemed lost, muttering why softly to herself.

Her guilt seemed to persist, her complexion not improving.

‘Um… ’

He extracted himself from the soft embrace and tapped the smartwatch again.

[You’ve done nothing wrong, Hong Yeon-hwa, so it’s alright.]

The story about her scarring my arm with Gop-hwa? It wasn’t Hong Yeon-hwa herself, nor was she involved in that incident.

Her family’s issue? He didn’t want to delve too deeply into that.

[If you still feel sorry, could you do me just one favor?]

“Yes. Just tell me.”

Staring blankly at the hologram, Hong Yeon-hwa stiffened but nodded at the last question mentioned.

[Please don’t get hurt.]

“…What?”

The request left her with a dumbfounded expression once again.

The request was sincere.

His heart had felt heavy all the way through the after-party, thinking that Hong Yeon-hwa was in pain.

And just a moment ago, when her complexion turned ashen and her breath choked, his mind went blank with worry.

Feeling her guilt-ridden face made his own heart ache.

He shook his head firmly.

[I won't accept any arguments. Since I'm the victim asking, the offender must comply with the request.]

Refusing to listen to any further arguments, he buried his face deeply into her embrace.

Fortunately, she seemed to accept it at last, her complicated expression giving way to stroking his hair. In one of her hands, she clutched the red scarf.

Good. He gathered himself from the dazed expression.

He wanted to run away from the embarrassment, but he had the excuse that Hong Yeon-hwa needed to hold him to maintain her mental stability, so he didn't flee.

'…Hong Yeon-hwa is not at fault… '

He quietly enjoyed the comforting strokes, recalling the answers he had just made.

The questions about whether Hong Yeon-hwa had injured him or tormented him with malice.

'It doesn't really matter.'

The answers weren't that important.

Even if Hong Yeon-hwa had caused him harm in the past. Even if she was the one who scarred his hand.

Even if she had bullied and oppressed him with malice.

If the affection she was showing him now was genuine, it was alright.

He could forgive her many times over for any wrongdoings in the past.

If the harm was not inflicted on others but only on him, even more so.

With that thought, he nestled further into her embrace.

Perhaps it was because he hadn't slept properly due to the scarf, but his consciousness started to wane.

'I'm sleepy… '

The anticipation of the scarf's reception, calming Hong Yeon-hwa's sudden seizure, and hearing the sudden revelation of his birth (theory) had exhausted him physically and mentally.

He didn't resist, and his consciousness faded.

* * *

[Player Correction System: Measurement]

▸Attributes

…

▸Unique Abilities

…

▸Mental State

「Affection Deficiency」: Desperately yearns for affection. The degree is exceptionally severe.

…

[Player Correction System: Favorability]

Lee Hayul→Hong Yeon-hwa

●●●●●●●●○○(83▹84/100)

「?」「Debt of Gratitude」「Regret」「Thankfulness」「Concern」

[The condition to resolve the ‘Curse of Silence’ has not been met.]

[The condition to resolve the ‘Curse of Solitude’ has not been met.]

CHAPTER 67
PREPARATION (1)

Unsettled thoughts trickled through my mind.

My fingers idly twitched as meaningless thoughts flowed past.

With a pop, a subtle pleasure spread from the joints of my fingers. It was a pleasant feeling.

At the same time, my senses returned. My once dull consciousness startled awake with the stimulation.

My legs, which had been trudging back to the dormitory, came to an abrupt halt.

“Ah.”

Reality came crashing in. The cruel reality I’d been trying to forget loomed closer.

A wave of self-loathing washed over me as I exhaled sharply and buried my face in my hands.

‘Why, why did I do that?’

I had visited Hong Yeon-hwa around lunchtime today.

Thinking it might be inconvenient to visit in the morning or evening, I chose a time after lunch.

It was supposed to be a brief visit to ask how she was and hand over the scarf, then return. Lingering too long with a patient wasn’t proper etiquette.

Despite my intentions of proper conduct, I ended up cozily asleep in the patient’s embrace.

I surveyed the surroundings with my spatial perception. The evening was turning

dark; even the sunset was fading.

Which meant dinner time had passed.

I had fallen asleep in Hong Yeon-hwa's arms until evening, and to add insult to injury, I had even dined with her.

"Yaaack…"

Mental damage immeasurable pounded my head, leaving me dizzy.

After handing over the scarf, Hong Yeon-hwa abruptly started gasping for breath, convulsing.

At that moment, I had no time to think. Reflexively, I had pulled her into an embrace.

Just like on the day of the freshman welcome when Hong Yeon-hwa had done the same for me in the infirmary.

Thankfully, the result was favorable. She returned to normal, and I remembered sighing with relief.

Yet, there was regret. Perhaps it would have been better to make some noise to call Ariel before embracing her.

If it weren't for the curse, I would have screamed for help right away.

The more days I lived like this, the more I acutely felt the inconvenience of not having a voice.

While the hologram was a luxury, nothing could replace speaking directly.

Another reason to hurry and get the Confession Necklace.

Regardless.

Embracing Hong Yeon-hwa to calm her down was within the realm of understanding. There was an emergency, after all.

But what about after hearing about the bloodline secret (conjecture)? Why did I hold

her and fall asleep like that?

It didn't make sense. I wondered if I was going crazy.

It was totally unlike me. Something was off.

If I had to guess why…

'Gop-hwa.'

I cautiously fiddled with my right arm.

The time in the tower when I wielded Gop-hwa. Just after, I felt a surge of emotion and behaved disgracefully towards Hong Yeon-hwa.

This time was the same. My emotions intensified. Thoughts became short-circuited, actions impulsive.

Being swayed by emotions and showing a tendency for impulsiveness.

A typical characteristic of Gop-hwa.

Could I truly possess Gop-hwa? Reluctantly, I recalled what Hong Yeon-hwa had said.

That I might be a part of the Gop-hwa family… I still wasn't sure.

Lee Hayul from my original world.

Clearly existing Lee Hayul from this world.

The records of this world's Lee Hayul with burn scars identical to the original world and the use of Gop-hwa…

'What in the world.'

Pondering as I walked, I soon arrived at the dormitory.

I opened the door and stepped inside. The interior of the dormitory was the same… except for one difference.

An unfortunate pile of yarn, destined never to become a masterpiece, was heaped in a corner of the living room like a mountain.

'I'll have to clean that up too.'

I rubbed my fingers together. Though not visible on the surface, close observation would reveal recent healings of minor biotic activities.

I learned knitting as a freshman at Shio-ram.

To train in versatility, it was best to try various skills.

That's why I'd been dabbling in handcrafts during spare moments.

Knitting and woodworking were prime examples.

Of course, with woodworking, I only went as far as simple wooden sculptures.

It might seem trivial, but I thought it wouldn't hurt to learn activities like knitting and woodworking that involved creation.

Thanks to being versatile, I easily picked up knitting. My first attempt produced a decent pair of socks, and later I could even make a scarf.

That's why I decided to make a scarf as a gift for Hong Yeon-hwa's sick visit…

– 'This isn't right.'

– 'I made it too poorly… '

– 'It's ugly.'

I wasn't satisfied with the finished product. I would wear it myself, but giving it as a gift seemed to reveal too many flaws.

One or two failures began to pile up… and time melted away like ice cream.

– 'Oh.'

After a few hours, a passable scarf was finally finished, and after some finishing

touches, the gift was complete.

There were accidents during the process, like being pricked by a thin lace needle or scissors.

Simple blades would have been withstood by toughened skin, but I wrapped delicate Qi around them, trying to be precise.

There were also some mishaps while incorporating temperature control spells into the process.

What resulted was a scarf (magical tool) with temperature control and durability-enhancing spells.

It was a genuine act of creation. Not a waste of time. It would help later when I delved into alchemy or metallurgy.

I rationalized as I cleaned up the clumps of yarn.

And so, the weekend ended.

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Through The Tower of Growth, I confirmed my own development.

Cadets of Shio-ram, gathered from all over the world. I survived alone for two whole days amidst their combined attacks. Even with my spatial perception on strike.

Of course, it was partly thanks to the luck of not encountering any leading figures, but it was evidence of my rapid improvement.

It was progress I hadn't dared to hope for.

Honestly, I wanted to jump for joy. Getting stronger in this power-driven world was a great blessing. It meant more chances to break the curse.

– Whooosh!

The main contributor to this achievement swung a fist at me.

The sound of the air being sliced reached my ears.

My spatial perception read the trajectory of the fist before the wind did.

The belated wind brushed my skin, signaling yet another attack.

Golden Qi swirled in a straight line towards me.

Typically, straightforward attacks are simple, making them easy to counter.

It's easier to read the trajectory and prepare a defense.

But I've been sparring with Professor Atra for almost a month now.

I know how varied that simple-looking punch can be.

A clumsy dodge would immediately result in the fist changing course and smashing into my jaw, and countering with Qi would end up with punches landing after several exchanges.

I've experienced it countless times. Despite all the pondering, there was no real counter to it.

It was simplicity close to the basics. But that simplicity allowed for a variety of changes, a lesson from Professor Atra.

I just had to fight back just as well. That was the only answer.

My choice was to fight fire with fire. The magic power rising from my core wrapped around both arms. I quickly manifested Qi around my fist.

Then I threw a punch. Fist met fist.

– Crunch!

The moment after the impact, I clenched my trembling fist. The vibration seemed to

travel through the bones to my head.

Qi around the fist. Physique energized by Qi. My physical abilities soaring day by day.

Even with my response, the impact was significant. I gritted my teeth and flung my fist.

It wasn't just punches. My legs moved tirelessly, changing my stance. Whenever an opening appeared, I didn't hesitate to throw in a kick.

We were on par physically. Professor Atra adjusted her body to suit my level.

Our skills were also similar. At first, she didn't use any high-level techniques that I couldn't handle.

Still, I was overwhelmed.

I had clearly seen the trajectory, yet I failed to respond. Previous attacks accumulated, creating opportunities I knew but couldn't prevent.

A knee kick flew towards my side. I quickly brought my hand down to defend.

– Thump!

"Ugh."

A jarring sensation transmitted from the arm struck by the knee.

My body was pushed back. I didn't resist. Instead, I kicked off the ground, widening the distance in response.

My body floated in the air. I felt an unfamiliar sensation of weightlessness and drew out the magic within me.

I released the magic into the surroundings. Utilizing the extracted magic, I constructed spells.

The process was swift. I shook off my arms and instantly manifested the spells.

The ground beneath Professor Atra's feet writhed, and blades of earth shot up.

Winds gathered all around me formed spears and were launched simultaneously.

This was the first phase. Again, I manipulated the magic and piled up another layer of spells. My floating body touched the ground and I regained my stance.

– BOOM!

That was the plan.

Before I could act, Professor Atra's foot slammed into the ground.

The earth trembled. The sprouting spikes hesitated.

Through her leg, magic power extended into the ground. Crack! The earthy spikes crumbled like cookies and scattered.

I dodged the flying debris as Professor Atra launched forward.

One step closed the distance, and the wind spears approached my face. Professor Atra moved indifferently.

There were fourteen wind spears.

She dodged nine. Two were deflected by her Qi-filled hands. The deflected wind spears disrupted the trajectory of the remaining three.

The spears exploded, creating a gust. Professor Atra's hair fluttered, but her cool eyes remained fixed on me.

Those eyes suddenly drew close. Professor Atra extended her fist unemotionally.

I couldn't stabilize my stance in time while casting the spell. I hastily unraveled the spells.

The backflow of magic made my head spin.

But I didn't give up and threw a punch.

– Thud!

It hurt.

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“Mixing magic into close combat is good, but you lack contingency plans for when the magic fails. Keep this in mind.”

– Nod…

I nodded sullenly.

After rolling around the training ground, it was time for feedback while catching my breath.

A brief respite where I hammered into my head what I lacked during the previous sparring session.

I lay face down on the ground, panting.

‘…It’s the same.’

I felt a rapid sense of growth compared to other cadets, but the sparring sessions were more or less unchanged.

At first, Professor Atra indulged me with a similar level of physical ability and skill.

She would analyze my level with emotionless eyes, and once the analysis was complete, she would increase her skill level.

Gradually being pushed back, I would ultimately be subdued in the end.

Then it happened. As I was nodding to the feedback, I felt a dizzying sensation at the tip of my nose.

Then, a red line trickled down.

“Ah. Nosebleed.”

It wasn’t from an injury. Although Professor Atra hit hard enough to leave bruises, she miraculously never inflicted a bleeding wound.

Of course, it occasionally happened, but it wasn’t her fault. It was mine for making mistakes.

This nosebleed was my doing.

More precisely, it wasn’t from impact but from the backflow of magic.

The magic I cut off mid-cast caused it.

Usually, when a spell is obstructed midway, the used magic backflows, harming the caster.

Most of the internal injuries magicians suffer are due to this backflow of magic.

It might sound self-conceited, but I handled magic well enough that the worst backflow resulted in just a little nosebleed.

‘It’s ticklish.’

As the blood trickled down my philtrum, my nose twitched.

Just as I was about to wipe it away, a handkerchief suddenly approached.

‘?’

The owner of the handkerchief was Professor Atra. She pulled out a handkerchief from her pocket and began to wipe my nose.

“Bend your head.”

Professor Atra pressed down on the crown of my head with her other hand. As my head tilted down, the nosebleed flowed again.

The handkerchief enveloped my nose and pressed down firmly. It didn’t hurt. The slight pressure was rather comforting.

The proper level of pressure continued. It didn't take long for the nosebleed to stop.

Professor Atra removed the handkerchief and said,

"Always be wary of magic backflow. Not just when casting spells, even the simple use of Qi and physical hardening can cause it."

–… Nod

I nodded, contemplating Professor Atra's advice internally.

The sparring continued as usual. She would hand me various weapons for our sessions. Some days, we'd spar with bare hands.

She intermittently taught me how to manipulate magic, Qi, and physical hardening.

The routine was the same.

But…

"Here."

[Thank you.]

'Something… '

Professor Atra offered me a water bottle. I accepted it, and the cold liquid cooled my grip.

As Professor Atra shook out the handkerchief after handing me the water bottle, I cocked my head.

Hadn't her attitude softened somewhat?

Was it just my imagination?

* * *

[Player Correction System: Creation]

Would you like to create a Scarf (Magical Tool)?

…

Would you like to create a Scarf (Magical Tool)?

…

Would you like to create a Scarf (Magical Tool)?

…

[Player Correction System: Favorability]

Lee Hayul→Atra Clyde

●●●●●●○○○○(65/100)

「Affection」「Fear」「Expectation」「Concern」

[The condition to resolve the ‘Curse of Silence’ has not been met.]

[The condition to resolve the ‘Curse of Solitude’ has not been met.]

CHAPTER 68
PREPARATION (2)

The fifth week at Shio-ram, following the tower entry, was uneventful.

There was still time left for the dungeon exploration, and the next tower entry would not be for another month or two.

Perhaps the only notable event left for the first semester might be the mid-term evaluation at the end of the free semester.

After the mid-term evaluation, the free semester ends, and we enter the regular semester, where education is restructured around majors.

From then on, cadets can finally select the lectures they want to attend.

The overall lecture time will be reduced. The quantity is decreased to increase density. Additional schedules for stress relief, such as club activities, are inserted into the spared time.

In essence, things will be more relaxed than they are now. Of course, it's insanity to play around all day; cadets need to manage their condition and practice individually.

Otherwise, they'll fall behind the hardworking cadets and plummet to the bottom of the rankings.

In the original work, sub-stories poured out from the regular semester.

Joining just one club would lead to many derivative quests, and through those, you become entangled with various characters, leading to even more quests.

Then, if you build favor with a leading character, you get involved with their faction.

During the first loop, I spent most of my time chasing these sub-stories. That's why it failed.

‘Everyone’s working hard.’

As always, I attended the old training ground.

Lying on the parched ground, I blankly recalled the recent atmosphere at the academy.

Should I call it enthusiasm? The cadets’ eyes were ablaze with zeal, pushing themselves in training and studies.

It was a markedly different vigor from before.

It’s not that the cadets were lazy on a usual basis.

Whenever I visited the training room or library after lectures, it was always bustling with cadets.

But recently… precisely since this week, the vibe has been exceptional.

‘The effect was tremendous.’

There was only one reason.

The experience of true growth through the tower’s blessing was exhilarating. Even by my estimation, it was warranted.

The Lee Hayul before and after the tower entry were vastly different entities. It sounds exaggerated, but it’s the truth.

The boost from the tower’s blessing was phenomenal.

Not just a rise in specs but also significant progress in skills. With Professor Atra’s endorsement, it’s an objective fact.

To make an intuitive comparison, if it was the Aidan from the time of the duel, he could now be crushed in one blow.

Of course, Aidan would have continued to grow as well… but that’s not the point.

My tower results prove that.

Scores gained from eliminating cadets, defeating monsters inside, and various other achievements.

After tallying all the scores and announcing the results, I successfully placed within the top 10.

Luck played a big part.

There were no leading characters among the cadets who chased me during the first and second days, or I was healed by Elia when I was about to be eliminated, or I received escort-like protection from the top two ranks, avoiding score loss.

…There was quite a bit of fortune, but still, the ranking stood.

The total score was around 1,200 points?

The score I personally earned was just over 900 points, and the score distributed to party members, including Baek Ahrin, was about 300 points.

I should start distributing the value of the Origin Egg soon… but it hasn't hatched yet, which is problematic.

I need to assess its value after hatching before deciding whether to distribute it or not.

'Should I put it aside with my scores… '

I mentally tapped on the calculator. Just in case, I left 300 points as a debt to distribute later.

What could I do with the remaining 1,000 points?

I skimmed through the catalog sent by Shio-ram.

Shio-ram awards such points based on academic performance to motivate cadets, allowing them to exchange points for rewards set by the academy.

'Hmm… '

1,000 points would be enough for a decent artifact with some change to spare. With

a little bargaining, even if not for an artifact, I could afford a few proper arms.

Considering how hard it is to obtain a useful artifact through normal means, it was an encouraging outcome.

After all, most of the Hidden Pieces I found on my weekend outings were artifacts.

Maybe I'll equip myself with an artifact before visiting a dungeon…

An outing.

'Ah.'

I don't want to go. Suddenly, that thought crossed my mind, and an involuntary sigh followed.

It's silly to say 'suddenly.' Whenever I think of going outside, the reluctance comes simultaneously.

The Confession Necklace. An artifact that could circumvent the Curse of Silence.

In my current situation, it's a necessary artifact. It's right to go get it, but…

'I'm scared.'

I just couldn't shake that thought.

In the original work, the Confession Necklace is an artifact that can be obtained in a dungeon.

The dungeon. A place full of threats.

I've been making leaps and bounds in my skills.

I've gauged my level. In The Tower of Growth, I was able to grapple even with the top-ranking cadets, even potentially overpowering them.

So what?

This is a cradle. A nurturing institution designed for sprouts that have yet to grow.

Everything experienced here is not real combat.

The dungeon practices had safety measures prepared by the Vice Principal, and yet, I was on edge throughout the dungeon conquest.

The tower entry only allowed me to feel a fraction of the pain. It was more like a virtual reality where you don't actually die.

'……'

The difference between the original Lee Hayul and the current one was enormous.

Without exaggeration, a flick from me now could burst the head of the original Lee Hayul.

But even so, I am still me.

Others around me may look up to me, but the core of cowardice within hasn't gone anywhere.

The rotten mind doesn't change, no matter the body's improvements.

The body may have changed, but the spirit stayed the same.

When I think about the main story… what will become of the world?

Will the world fall to ruin? The first loop didn't end with a total annihilation, but it reached a dark age comparable to the apocalypse.

'Sigh…'

I couldn't think of any countermeasures.

Lying in the center of the old training ground, I waited for Professor Atra to arrive.

I had a newfound understanding of a dog waiting for its owner.

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Superhumans possess an organ called the Core, through which they hold magic power.

They absorb the magic from the outside world, guide it through their circuit to the Core, and accumulate it.

During this process, impurities inevitably mix in.

Though commonly referred to as the magic of nature, if categorized finely, its properties are innumerable.

They take in and permanently assimilate these countless types of magic powers. It's inevitable that a variety of impurities get mixed in.

– Whoom…

The magic within moved. It traveled through the circuits in the Core, circulating through the body from head to toe.

The movement of magic, visiting every part of the body from fingers to toes, was unhindered.

Atra, who had her hands on Lee Hayul's back sensing the flow of magic, felt these movements clearly.

It was after the sparring session, a process of managing the magic.

Realigning the scattered flow of magic from the battle, filling the depleted spaces, it was a practice of honing the magic power.

At the same time, Atra also manipulated her magic. She awakened her latent power and let it circle through her body.

It was a measure for Lee Hayul, who could easily read the flow of magic through his sensing ability.

The movement of Lee Hayul's magic circulating within changed subtly.

He adapted his method on the spot after observing Atra's magic.

'There's nothing to criticize here.'

Watching the magic flow smoothly like water, admiration came naturally. There was no slight stutter in the control of magic.

It was as natural as moving one's limbs, which no one teaches. It's just something known instinctively.

Lee Hayul's magic control had reached that level.

Even as she taught him, Atra continuously felt that his natural talent for magic far exceeded a certain level.

What stood out even more was the purity of his magic.

Considering the accumulation process of magic, it's inevitable for a superhuman's magic to contain impurities.

Lee Hayul's magic defied that common sense.

It was clean and pure. The nature of his magic was simply like that.

Even while accumulating magic, that purity did not vanish.

Thus, despite the lower output, the power of his Qi and magic exceeded the norm.

Time counted silently, and Atra removed her hand from Lee Hayul's back.

"That's enough."

Lee Hayul took a deep breath and wriggled his body. The breath felt refreshingly crisp.

Lee Hayul, who had just finished realigning his magic, tilted his head back.

Atra, kneeling on one knee, saw Lee Hayul's round face.

Her gaze swept over Lee Hayul's face. Minor traces from the recent sparring were

healing in real-time.

'…He adapts quickly.'

The recovery training Atra had suggested.

It wouldn't have been so efficient without a body just starting to grow and the blessing of growth.

Atra herself had done without the blessing of growth, but ordinary superhumans would reject such training with disgust.

She had planned to gradually imprint it into her body throughout her time at Shioram, but Lee Hayul's body was already surpassing the frontline in recovery ability.

It was an abnormal occurrence.

The control of magic was one thing, the purity of magic another, but the source of this recovery ability was unfathomable.

A unique ability related to recovery… It was different from that. In Atra's eyes, it was just the inherent ability of his body.

[Professor.]

His eyes were closed, yet Atra was certain Lee Hayul was observing her.

"Yes."

It was getting late.

The sun had already set beyond the horizon, and the orange glow of twilight was setting in.

Atra responded to the rising hologram as she stood up.

[I'm planning to visit an outside dungeon this weekend.]

– This weekend I'll head out to the dungeon~

Suddenly, my body stiffened.

* * *

[Player Correction System: Pioneering]

[Quest “Defeat 8th-tier Monster” achieved]

[Quest “Defeat Multiple 8th-tier Monsters” achieved]

[Quest “Defeat 7th-tier Monster” achieved]

[Quest “Defeat Alpha Monster of 5th-tier” achieved]

…

[Quest “Enter The Tower of Growth” achieved]

…

[Quest “Earn 100 Points of Shio-ram Study Score” achieved]

[Quest “Earn 200 Points of Shio-ram Study Score” achieved]

[Quest “Earn 300 Points of Shio-ram Study Score” achieved]

…

[Quest “Origin Egg” achieved]

…

[Remaining points will be accumulated.]

CHAPTER 69
PREPARATION (3)

For humanity, monsters are a grave affliction.

The number of lives claimed by monsters during the chaos was uncountable, and even now, many are still being sacrificed to these creatures.

Despite claims that we've moved past the chaotic era or that an age of peace has dawned, the fact remains unchanged: monsters are dangerous.

If a fourth-tier monster were to appear within the heartland, the devastation would be immense, let alone overcoming it.

Lately, there's been an increase in those deluded by false security.

The risk posed by monsters persists. Not only high-tier ones like the fourth or third tier, but even the more commonly seen low-tier monsters pose a threat.

The danger of dungeons, which scatter these monsters, goes without saying.

A mere pup can boast dominance within its home, but to elaborate on a monster backed by a dungeon would be a tiresome feat.

Monsters, and the dungeons that harbor them, are perilous.

Deaths within dungeons are a common occurrence.

'……'

Atra gently stroked her tight face, lowering her gaze.

In the momentary silence.

She noticed Lee Hayul shrinking into himself, mistakenly thinking he had done something wrong.

Despite no fault of his own, his deflated demeanor, overly cautious and pitiable, was reminiscent of a puppy caught in the rain, awaiting its owner's reaction.

She opened her mouth to correct his misunderstanding, but no words came out. She simply could not bring herself to say anything.

This profession, linked inextricably with monsters and manipulated by the association for decades, is always fraught with danger. Heroes have an uncertain fate, never knowing when their end might come.

Those who boasted of their skills one day could vanish without trace the next.

This is especially true in the borderlands, and even in the dungeons within the heartland.

If her disciple were to leave behind even fragments of a corpse, it would be an above-average outcome.

"…Is… Is that so?"

Atra inhaled deeply, sweeping her hand across her face to gauge the date.

It's the fifth week into Shio-ram's term… so, the first week of April.

'Heh.'

An inward hollow laugh escaped. By some cruel irony, the date was eerily close to that anniversary.

How bitterly coincidental.

"…Did you get permission for the external activity?"

Shio-ram fundamentally restricts the cadets' outings without academic permission.

Additionally, the entry of outsiders is meticulously scrutinized for the safety of the cadets.

Of course, the conditions for cadet outings are more lenient than one might expect, with many cadets heading out on weekends.

[Yes, I have received permission.]

When Atra, trying to regain her composure, inquired, Lee Hayul hastily replied, his stance retracted.

At that response, Atra bit her lip.

Shio-ram has granted him permission. Then there's no reason for Atra to hold him back… No reason…

'…Is there a reason to hold back?'

The thought suddenly made her head spin.

After all, Lee Hayul sought to bear the mantle of a hero. The primary occupation of a hero involves killing monsters.

A combat-specialized hero kills monsters.

If specialized in support, they assist those who kill monsters.

If even support is challenging, they develop necessary technology and craft equipment for monster slaying.

For Lee Hayul, part of the combat branch, venturing into dungeons where monsters abound is a matter of course, and there is no reason to obstruct it.

In fact, it would be laughable to do so.

One aspiring to be a hero cannot be barred from entering a dungeon.

That's why she hadn't stopped him then, and why that choice was regretted.

Now, too… there was no reason to stop him.

Atra remained silent for a while. After some time passed, with hesitation, she finally opened her lips.

Uncharacteristically cautious and in a soft voice, she said,

"…Alright, take care."

The reply was similar to back then.

* * *

'…Did I make a mistake?'

Observing Professor Atra's departing figure, I could sense something different about her… a certain lack of strength in her steps.

She grew distant and soon stepped beyond the range of my spatial perception.

I was left alone in the old training ground. Mindlessly chewing over the situation, I let out a deep sigh.

Rubbing the back of my neck, the sweat that had momentarily ceased during the break began to seep out again.

More precisely, it was cold sweat.

Fanning my face with my hand, I recalled the recent events.

After feedback at the end of the lecture, I informed Professor Atra that I would be outside over the weekend.

I added that I planned to visit a dungeon as well.

Permission from Shio-ram had already been secured. I had submitted a request a few days prior, and the approval text arrived shortly after.

I could have just gone and returned without a word, since I wouldn't see Professor Atra over the weekend, but I felt it was only right to inform her beforehand, given her role as my major professor.

'What was it… '

Professor Atra's demeanor had been unmistakably different just now.

Upon hearing my plans to visit a dungeon, her expression had hardened coldly.

My breath hitched. It was a negative, adult expression, far from affirmation.

Although I managed to contain it, my pulse fluttered with fear at the daunting visage.

Thankfully, her expression softened after a while, but there were odd signs like her chewing her lip and her gaze wandering restlessly.

'Dungeon?'

She didn't react much to the mention of going outside, but she had a strong response to the word 'dungeon.'

It had been the same before. Professor Atra had a particular aversion to the topic of dungeons.

Still, she was well-versed in dungeon knowledge.

A paradoxical sort.

Perhaps she disliked dungeons so much that she made an effort to overcome them.

But considering today's reaction, that explanation seemed insufficient.

Professor Liana also mentioned,

Despite her brusque and unsightly temper.

There might be few like her, but she's someone with circumstances of her own to deal with.

A fair point.

Professor Atra, being human, certainly has her own issues. Reasons unknown to me for her aversion to dungeons.

– Click

There is no one without circumstances. The moment I remembered that phrase, my steps involuntarily halted.

Everyone has their own reasons. Not everything in the world is straightforwardly right or wrong.

Decisions thought to be right at the time can end up being the wrong choice, and vice versa.

There is no one without circumstances. Everyone has their own stories to tell.

With that in mind.

Did my parents have their own reasons? Was there a story behind their treatment of me? Was there a reason… they had to act that way?

'Shit.'

It was a premise I didn't want to entertain.

I clenched my teeth tightly and forced my frozen legs to move.

I had to prepare for my outing.

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It goes without saying, but Shio-ram grants its cadets various benefits.

There are too many to list one by one in the regulations, but notably, there are rewards based on points… or academic credits.

Cadets receive these credits based on the education provided at Shio-ram and the various evaluations they undergo.

Examples include the scores from dungeon practices, pop quizzes, and simple practical exams during lectures, and the points received from this tower entry.

These credits not only serve as proof of academic achievement but also come with significant rewards.

‘1,000 points… ’

I earned 1,300 points from The Tower of Growth, setting aside 300 points for the value of the Origin Egg.

There are also points from dungeon practices and other exams, but not a bulk of points compared to what was earned from the tower.

It’s Friday afternoon now.

Since the major lectures are over, I could head straight to the Gate Terminal, but first, I plan to pick up an artifact with my credits.

In the original work, these credits should be utilized effectively.

Being an educational institution where the owner of The Tower of Growth and globally-ranked superhumans gather, the catalog of rewards is varied.

Meaning, artifacts comparable to Hidden Pieces existed.

Of course, there’s a range in grades and practicality among Hidden Pieces. The artifacts listed in the catalog also vary greatly in value depending on the type.

There weren’t many artifacts that could be obtained so quickly.

But roaming dungeons alone outside is frankly terrifying.

Snowball or not, if I die, it’s all over, so I plan to grab an artifact that can bolster my powers.

I’ve perused the original knowledge and catalog to determine which artifact to take.

The mid-high tier artifact “Wings of the Sky.”

An artifact made of sheer, semi-translucent fabric that determines its defensive power based on the purity of the infused magic.

A selection considering the purity of magic, which those around me praise as my strength.

Additionally, it has an automatic repair function that consumes magic and, with practice, a remote manipulation feature that allows individual control of the artifact.

Judging solely by its features, it would rank high even among superior artifacts, but the condition of maintaining magic purity is not easily met.

Hence, given the condition for smooth operation, the grade was measured a bit lower. For the average user, it exhibits mid-high tier performance.

But with my particularly high purity of magic, it should show commendable performance.

Filled with anticipation, I headed to the Central Administration Building near the central plaza.

For important matters like artifact distribution, the Central Administration Building is the place to go.

A brisk run and I promptly arrived at the Central Administration.

“Long time no see, Cadet Lee Hayul. I am Vice-Principal Venus Litera, in charge of artifact distribution.”

I met the Vice-Principal, who appeared to have come out to greet me. She gave a slight bow before looking this way.

Her emotion-light purple eyes captured my form.

I inwardly flustered at the unexpected encounter, then returned the bow.

It had been nearly a month since we last met.

CHAPTER 70
SILENCE

The Vice-Principal led me into a reception room within the Central Administration Building.

The reception room had a standard layout.

The decor, wallpaper, and furnishings, while maintaining a basic decorum, all composed a setting that was overall quite comfortable.

“Here is tea brewed from Monarch leaves.”

[Thank you.]

As I entered the reception room and was taking in my surroundings, the Vice-Principal guided me to a sofa and personally served tea from the set prepared to one side.

Sitting on the plush sofa, I could feel its softness against my hips as I picked up a teacup from the table.

The warmth of the cup seeped into my grasp.

As I watched the steam rising from the tea, a faint sense of anticipation also arose.

Obviously, I knew it wouldn’t work, but hope springs eternal.

I lifted the teacup, delicately raising it to avoid any spillage, and brought it to my lips.

Before sipping, I cautiously sniffed its aroma.

…

After judging the temperature for a moment, I tilted the cup and let the warm liquid fill my mouth.

…I didn't really expect to taste anything. How could I with the curse still intact?

With that resignation, I took a few sips of what felt like warm water.

The Vice-Principal also partook of her share of tea a few times.

After a brief interval, the Vice-Principal, who had been waiting for me to finish my tea, spoke up.

"The management and distribution of important rewards like artifacts are under my care for security reasons. That's why I have the honor of attending to Cadet Lee Hayul today."

It was a concise explanation of the current situation.

She must have noticed my curiosity as to why the Vice-Principal herself was involved.

While one must be present to receive an artifact, applying for it could also be done via the homepage.

I had applied a few days ago and was now here to receive it.

"The artifact you have requested is named 'Wings of the Sky' or 'Celestial Garb', of mid-high tier. Does that match the information you had prior?"

– Nod

"If so, do you consent to the distribution of the artifact?"

[Yes, I consent.]

The Vice-Principal nodded and snapped her fingers with a flick. Her magic power fluctuated for an instant.

– Whoooooom!

'?'

My spatial perception rippled. The reception room-sized spatial perception reacted

violently, as if repelling something, a significant resonance transmitted through it.

Startled, I straightened up.

“Hm.”

Observing my reaction, the Vice-Principal nodded, as if she had been expecting such.

“May I grant permission for entry?”

‘Entry? Permission?’

I was puzzled. Did I have any say in granting permission for entry here?

While considering this, my attention was suddenly drawn to the violently oscillating spatial perception.

The Vice-Principal’s magic, which had fluttered within her, and her possession of a unique spatial ability.

A spatial perception that felt a strong repulsion from a particular side…

‘Hmm… ’

I regard spatial perception as a range for gathering information. Narrowing it reduces incoming data, and widening it exponentially increases the collected information.

Let’s think about it differently.

Not just as a range for information gathering, but perhaps, as a kind of domain…

Feeling perplexed, I subtly adjusted my spatial perception.

Not to widen it. Not to change the type of information gathered, nor to select what gets picked up.

Rather, a sensation of pushing open a persistently knocking pressure from side to side.

– Click

Simultaneously, as the Vice-Principal snapped her fingers again, an alien sensation was felt through the now-opened spatial perception.

Space was artificially torn apart. Beyond the torn space, the space beyond felt there, an unknown space, clearly outside the current range.

– Zzt

A current flickered through my head. A dizzying sensation imprinted itself in my mind.

'Spatial transfer.'

The Vice-Principal's ability. It was vividly sensed through spatial perception.

Something emerged from the torn space.

A thin, semi-transparent blue fabric that seemed to flutter away with just a breath, appeared before my eyes.

The 'Wings of the Sky'. Also referred to as 'Celestial Garb'.

'Oh.'

Seeing the blue fabric gently resting on the Vice-Principal's arms, a surge of excitement rose. I had to control myself not to bounce in my seat.

The Vice-Principal, after briefly inspecting the artifact's condition, nodded.

Then, she extended her arms towards me.

I too reached out, accepting the fabric offered to me.

'Wow.'

It's soft.

Even with clothing in between, the touch of the fabric felt silky. Could this be how it

feels to caress finely woven silk by a master?

A sense of profound appreciation washed over me.

This was the first time I had actually obtained an artifact.

I did acquire the Hidden Piece known as the Origin Egg, but it remained unopened and, more than anything, felt like a gacha ticket.

But having the 'Wings of the Sky' in hand, I genuinely felt like I had acquired something real.

Caressing the soft fabric, I gently pushed my magic into it.

– Hum!

The 'Wings of the Sky' vibrated. The semi-transparent fabric momentarily took on a blue hue, then returned to transparency, repeating the process.

It felt almost like a happy puppy feasting on good food.

The process of my magic gradually seeping into it.

Soon, an unfamiliar sensation emerged. It was hard to describe, but perhaps a sense of unity?

'It's ready.'

I manipulated the magic. I moved the magic contained within the 'Wings of the Sky'.

Simultaneously, the 'Wings of the Sky' writhed, then surged up my arm like flowing water.

Finally, it settled around my shoulders, spreading out gracefully behind me.

Just like a cloak. It moved as I thought, changing its shape.

Shape-shifting and remote manipulation function.

'Wow.'

What an extraordinary sensation. It felt like having an awkward extra arm.

“The distribution of the artifact is now complete. I hope this artifact will assist in carving the path of a hero.”

[Thank you.]

I toyed with the end of the ‘Wings of the Sky’ as the Vice-Principal, who had been watching over me, extended formal congratulations, signaling the end of the distribution process.

I felt a bit more at ease.

Besides remote manipulation and shape-shifting, it also had a basic protective function, which should increase my safety.

Also, being operated by my own high-purity magic, it’s worth checking the synergistic effects.

The rest I can test on my way.

There was no further business here. I gave a nod of thanks to the Vice-Principal for her trouble, and she extended her hand.

Curious, I looked closely and found a magical device similar to the bracelet I received during dungeon practice.

“A magical device with an identity-obscuring feature.”

What’s this? As I wondered, she continued with the explanation.

“The attention drawn to Cadet Lee Hayul is more significant than you may assume. To avoid any inconvenience, I strongly recommend you keep this with you at all times.”

‘Ah.’

I had planned to bring something like this before leaving, but the Vice-Principal had already taken care of it.

Once again, I expressed my gratitude and left the reception room.

* * *

A quiet stillness settled within the reception room.

An unexceptional silence. A familiar atmosphere for her.

Venus Litera, the Vice-Principal of Shio-ram, took a sip of the remaining tea.

The magic-kept warmth of the tea spread a subtle fragrance as it warmed her lips, a scent known to enhance concentration.

Reflecting on the recent departure of Lee Hayul, who bowed his head and exited, she pondered the sight of him manipulating the artifact, his lips curling with joy, akin to a child delighted with a new toy.

Then he left the space as if in a hurry, probably heading straight towards the Gate Terminal.

'Hmm… '

Venus was opposed to Lee Hayul's external activities.

Lee Hayul was fragile in his current state. His potential was immense, but it was his current state that mattered.

His potential is undisputed.

He is someone the five Tower Masters have sought painstakingly. Given time, he will surely reach pioneering status and perhaps even go beyond.

But for now, he's not at that level. He needs time.

A place where he can be assured of safety from threats, cultivate himself, and stabilize his soul and spirit.

That place is Shio-ram.

This institution was created for the special purpose of nurturing just one person.

Venus believed that sending Lee Hayul out at this point was not a wise decision.

Moreover, sending him without any escort was even more ludicrous.

"……"

But what mattered was not her own thoughts.

Venus flicked her finger after setting down her teacup.

– Click

The sunlight illuminating the reception room vanished. The glass windows that had let the light pass through were nowhere to be found. The table was gone as well.

Precisely speaking, the entire environment had changed, with Venus being the only constant.

Spatial transfer. An ability she expanded from her unique skills.

Unperturbed, Venus stood up. It was not the high-end sofa from the reception room that creaked but a wooden chair rocking back and forth.

Venus glanced around.

Not a trace of sunlight could penetrate this darkness.

Silence was rampant, a different kind of silence than the one she was accustomed to in the reception room.

The silence there was of the everyday variety, often felt and comfortable.

This place was different.

It didn't fit into the everyday category. It wasn't a commonly felt silence, rather one that could be described as eerie.

Venus moved.

The space rippled with each step.

The darkness was so thick that the existence of a floor or a ceiling couldn't be verified by sight alone, but she knew exactly where to head.

The walk didn't last long.

Venus stopped somewhere, her eyes closing and reopening. The half-closed purple irises stared in a certain direction.

And then, Venus's eyes shone. Against the dull purple backdrop, constellations rose and set repeatedly.

Venus read the stars. Here, where the night sky was invisible, she read fragments of the future through the stars.

There was a small star. A star that shone brighter than anything else.

A malevolent star was approaching it.

The real threats of the future were laughable in comparison, yet, for the current star, it was perilous enough.

Could Lee Hayul overcome this malevolent star? The potential of the future and the current level are entirely different, so is it right to leave it be?

And should he, who could grow even within the safety of the cradle, be left to dive into trials?

"Lee Hayul has received his artifact and is headed outside. Won't you stop him?"

No answer came.

"If you're not going to stop him, how about providing a minimum escort? It would prevent the worst-case scenario."

Again, there was no answer. Venus did not find this odd. On the contrary, she continued speaking as if it were expected.

Venus was the proxy of the Principal, who does not appear in public.

The Vice-Principal represents the will of the Principal, not her own.

The important thing is the will of the Principal, not that of the Vice-Principal.

However, the Principal, being forced into silence by the curse, cannot express any will.

Venus always repeats the same unanswered questions in this place.

Thus, Venus acts only based on the little information she can glean, always guessing the will of the Principal.

No answer came.

Venus was plunged into contemplation.

Her personal opinion did not welcome Lee Hayul's outing, but she had allowed it. She also did not provide an escort.

It was because the Principal had once barely conveyed such an intention.

Now… after reading the constellations and sensing the malevolent star, she was deep in thought.

Her task was to guess the Principal's intentions. But after seeing the malevolent star, she couldn't make a proper judgment.

That's when it happened.

"Disengage intervention."

"……!"

A very faint voice resonated through the space.

If not for the utter silence, it was so faint that no one would have detected it.

"Behold, observe."

Yet, at the same time, the overwhelming presence of the voice was palpable. Even if the place had been filled with noise, everyone would have heard this voice.

It was weak, but strong. The voice felt paradoxical and Venus's usually languid eyes opened wide.

The Principal broke the silence, albeit temporarily. And it wasn't just an ambiguous expression of will but a clear vocalization.

Despite the rebound from the curse, it was an intention expressed at the risk of enduring it.

"…Yes, I understand."

Venus, collecting herself from the shock, bowed toward the source of the voice.

The Principal's intention, conveyed at the risk of suffering the rebound of the curse.

Her own judgment aside, following the words of the Principal was the correct thing to do.

CHAPTER 71
A CHICK LEAVING THE CRADLE (1)

The external threat to humanity today is embodied by monsters.

It's not that there are no civil wars among humans.

In fact, they are quite prevalent, but unlike before the cataclysm, there's no global scale frenzy of wars being waged.

The reason is simple: There's no leisure for it. Even now, in what's called the age of peace, it's the same.

Even now, somewhere, they praise the passing of the Dark Ages, the chaos, and the arrival of an era of peace.

And they have their reasons.

The chaos… Compared to about 40 years ago, the difference is like heaven and hell.

It's normal for people to die at the hands of monsters. However, it's less common now for thousands to be slaughtered overnight by a horde of monsters as they were in the past.

The emergence and collapse of dungeons are dangerous. But it's rare now for dozens of dungeons to burst in succession, wreaking havoc and spewing out legions of monsters as they did before.

I haven't heard news of a high-tier monster rampaging and wiping out an entire city. In the past, such reports were quite common.

It's not strange to think that peace has settled in various ways different from before.

Among the factors that brought about such peace…

Shio-ram has been an indispensable entity, and for those malcontents who wish for a

world filled with chaos, Shio-ram is among the most irksome elements.

Shio-ram, established well over a century ago.

Naturally, there have been countless scheming efforts to overturn it.

According to the original records, there were invasions by armies of monsters and also tricks played by turncoats who were on the verge of pioneering.

None of these attempts were ever successful. Not a single exception. All such ploys were thwarted.

Shio-ram's level of security is well-known across the world.

In the 11th cycle, even a Diamond Warrior who surpassed the norms found it extremely difficult to breach Shio-ram. It was close to failure.

Even that entity managed to destroy only about half of Shio-ram before having to flee, such was the might of its defenses.

Thinking back, this is one of the reasons I dared to step into the cradle.

That chaotic first day.

Regardless, I thought I would be safe if I entered here. I thought I could grow, and at the very least, I believed I could buy some time to think, so I stepped in.

'The cradle, huh… '

On the way to the Gate Terminal for an outing.

In short, steps taken, albeit temporarily, to leave the cradle.

As I fiddled with the edge of the 'Wings of the Sky,' I felt a curious resonance.

Especially when I thought of the name Shio-ram.

Cradle (搖籃). A device for rocking and either entertaining a baby or putting it to sleep.

A cradle is an infant's item. Naturally, there are no sharp or dangerous elements.

Rather, it serves as a fence that separates and protects from external threats so that the baby is not subjected to harm.

Then, am I like a baby crawling out of the cradle on my own?

The comparison felt trivial. It was embarrassing to liken myself to a baby. But compared to the real powerhouses, maybe the level of a baby isn't so far off?

Even Professor Atra could probably handle someone like me with the ease of subduing a baby.

'I've set a goal.'

I was certainly safe in Shio-ram. Realistically, I've grown as fast as possible within what's feasible and have secured time to think.

'I'm going to break the curse.'

I can't live like this. To die someday is inevitable… Ah…

…except for some special cases of immortality, it's inevitable that people die, but I don't want to live constricted by this curse, unable to enjoy life.

That's why I've been gathering strength to break the curse and am now momentarily leaving the cradle to find a way to circumvent the curse of silence.

'Am I being hasty?'

It's been only a month. I haven't lived long enough to say, but it doesn't feel like enough time to properly prepare.

Perhaps investing a bit more time wouldn't be so bad. In just a few months, I'll be much stronger than I am now…

Sometimes I feel rushed. Is it because of the curse of early death, never knowing when I might die?

I wasn't fully aware of it, but it seemed there was another reason.

Before my reverie concluded, the structure of the Gate Terminal entered my spatial perception.

'Sigh… '

At the same time, a tension surged through me. A bead of cold sweat trickled down my nape.

I couldn't forget the incident at the Gate Terminal.

The day when my crude spatial perception inspected the gate, observed something, and nearly burst my head open from the crisis it sensed.

'Is it still…?'

Would it be the same now?

If this were before, I would have certainly turned off my spatial perception, navigating only by ear and touch.

I didn't want to gamble with my life. With spatial perception having grown, the risk of death might have even increased.

But my thoughts have changed recently.

Spatial perception is the unique ability I've used the most and have grown most accustomed to.

With that, my understanding of spatial perception has increased significantly.

'Phew… '

With a sigh, I shook off my thoughts and continued walking. The cloak-shaped 'Wings of the Sky' transformed into something similar to an overcoat.

The space surrounding the Gate Terminal came into my awareness. I passed through it.

Facilities including a less crowded lounge came into view. I passed them too.

I didn't retract my spatial perception. I kept walking.

And then, a whirl of blue entered my range.

'……'

Space undulated. It surged towards the center like a vortex, yet also crashed back towards the edges, a turbulence and a flow of space.

It was similar to the entrance of a dungeon but with perceptible differences.

It was also different from the spatial transfer initiated by the Vice-Principal earlier.

The Vice-Principal created a small hole in space, achieving her goal and sealing it, while the gate looked like a large hole had been punched through and fixed in place.

Though the methods differed, the result was the same: the connection of spaces at different coordinates.

The important part wasn't that.

With a deep breath, I steeled myself.

An understanding of spatial perception gained through experience. Now, I might be able to perceive it, even just a little.

I embraced the information I had been resisting.

The space between spaces. The emptiness in between was pulled into view.

…

…And nothing out of the ordinary happened.

'?'

I tilted my head, perplexed, and worked my spatial perception.

There was a blankness. The space between spaces. The empty gap, which felt abnormal, was filled with magic power.

It was slightly different from typical magic power. The density was as thick as inside the towers, relatively pure and clean magic.

Other than that, I detected no peculiarities. I didn't feel the brain-shattering shock, nor did I sense anything tremendous.

There was only magic power.

'What was that about?'

The result felt anticlimactic compared to what I had braced myself for.

Staring blankly at the emptiness, I decided not to waste any more time and proceeded with the procedures at the desk.

"Identity confirmation complete… Destination set to Edinburgh Gate Terminal. Any changes to report?"

[No, it remains the same.]

The procedure was simple. Since I had already matched my entry application in advance, a simple verification was all that was needed.

This spared me any waiting time. I headed straight for the swirling gate.

'…Sigh.'

Once again, I stared into the emptiness. Still, no stabbing headache. Something felt off…

A sense of unease lingered. Was I missing something? But nothing specific came to mind.

I pushed myself into the gate. A dizzying sensation enveloped me as I transitioned across the void.

The first stop would be the Edinburgh Gate in Scotland.

From there, I would take a train north to search for the Hidden Piece I remembered. Ultimately, I would arrive at a small town called 'Shipnaha' in the north to find the

Necklace of Confession.

It was a fitting plan.

* * *

Typically, superhuman groups form clans.

A clan is what you call a group organized by various superhumans for mutual benefits and safety.

Clans are for-profit groups that sometimes violate ethics or rules in the pursuit of their members' interests.

The 'Guardians of the Northern Mountains' stationed in Shipnaha was no exception.

They hadn't committed a tremendous illegality. They hadn't engaged in heinous acts against humanity.

They had simply postponed dealing with one Class 4 dungeon.

Its internal formation was a cave, with standard Class 7 entities like Red Hounds, also known as Crimson Canines, being the sole emergents.

There were no traps or similar elements. A simple dungeon where only Crimson Canines appeared.

Crimson Canines weren't particularly remarkable creatures.

Even low-ranking heroes could single-handedly exterminate several, and a modest party led by a mid-low-ranking hero could easily clear them out.

The reason they didn't bother exterminating the dungeon, choosing instead to maintain it, was straightforward.

The fur of Crimson Canines sold for a high price.

Its insulating effects were exceptional, and if processed right, the texture was superb.

Since it was monster fur, it inherently offered some protection, and it wasn't too

difficult to process.

In short, it was a lucrative source of income. There was no reason to hastily eradicate such a gold mine.

Many clans had established a number of such ‘farms’.

It wasn’t unusual. It was common.

But why this predicament?

– Crunch, crack!

“Ah, aahhh…!”

Low-ranking hero, Gerard McClay, writhed on the ground, clutching his empty sleeve. The dizzying sense of loss was more overwhelming than the pain, enough to agitate his mind.

The chilling noise echoed through the cave and filled his ears.

Gerard forced his trembling eyelids open to look towards the source of the sound.

Objectively, the ‘Guardians of the Northern Mountains’ were not a group to be ashamed of.

The number and rank of members were reasonable. The only flaw might be the absence of a dominant power to represent the clan, but there were plenty of mid-upper level powerhouses. Managing a dungeon like this was simple.

Mid-upper level hero. A rank fit for a large clan’s expedition team, and in a smaller clan, they could secure a significant position.

– Crack—!

Mid-upper level hero, Robert Brand’s neck was crunched between thick jaws. His flailing limbs trembled and then stiffened.

In the dimness, the sight of his head rolling into the large maw was vividly clear.

The sound of chewing followed. The cause of the eerie noise. Blood gushed from the severed neck, drenching the floor like a waterfall.

– Gulp—

With a coarse breath, the blood pulsed momentarily. The monster had swallowed the head, and Robert's body dangled from the creature's hand.

The monster raised an arm. Blood poured from the inverted corpse. The monster once again opened its mouth wide to catch the blood.

The sight of the monster gulping down human blood as if it were a beverage was grotesque. Blood that it couldn't catch drenched its fur, which was already dyed a dingy red.

Standing on two legs, the creature's size was about three times that of an adult man, and its thick, muscular flesh was visible even through matted red fur.

Crimson Canines walk on all fours. While they're larger than typical canine breeds, they're not that massive.

They're certainly not strong enough to devour multiple mid-upper level heroes.

The Association classifies monsters, fitting them into standard ranks after analysis.

From the lowest Class 8 to the highest Class 1.

They analyze the monsters' strength and recommend which class of heroes and hunters should attempt to subdue them.

But they always emphasize not to take this for granted.

It's just a standard, they say, and there are always exceptional individuals that arise.

'Variant… '

This one must be such an exceptional individual.

An entity born beyond the limits of its species, backed by the living dungeon.

As the edges of my vision darkened, the creature moved.

The body in its grasp had long been expended.

The beast's breath approached. Even as consciousness blurred, I could feel its immense appetite.

Gerard knew how his body would be used.

– Chomp

"Ghk…"

A massive claw enveloped his torso. The hand was so large that only Gerard's feet and face were left exposed to the air. His body hung limply, suspended in the void, accompanied by a terrifying pressure.

Foul breath patted his face. Soon, a thick maw yawned open. Between the teeth were visible remnants of flesh and bits of bone.

'Those damn bastards… '

An absurd end.

He knew that many heroes met unfortunate fates, but he never imagined he would end up like this.

To bear the title of hero and have the end reduced to monster feed is just…

'The fish farm, the bullshit… '

With belated regret.

– Crunch—!

Gerard's upper body was completely devoured.

It was an end too swift to even feel pain.

CHAPTER 72
A CHICK LEAVING THE CRADLE (2)

In the original work, the player's range of activity spanned the entire map of Earth.

The character could move anywhere on the map if they wished.

Of course, the main stage of part one is Shio-ram.

This is just a recommendation, not a necessity. The system doesn't prevent players from escaping.

But the problem lies in the fact that if one were to bolt from Shio-ram, their growth graph would take a nosedive.

In the 7th cycle, unable to suppress my curiosity, I fled from Shio-ram and ended up failing miserably, on par with the 1st cycle.

My growth was painfully slow; maybe it was the price of my name once being associated with special admissions because I even had to fend off assassins.

With no backing forces and presumed turncoats targeting my life, my already slow growth was further delayed as I dealt with the aftermath and tended to my injuries.

They say you don't know if it's poop or soybean paste until you eat it.

The results of an unchecked curiosity cost me an entire cycle to learn.

That's why, in part one, I was firmly planted in Shio-ram.

Theoretically, to achieve the fastest growth, one had to stick inside Shio-ram and suckle on the blessing of growth for four straight years.

In part two, after graduating from Shio-ram, the player can wander around various maps.

By then, dark clouds may loom over the world, but movement is still possible.

However, there are places one cannot travel to.

To be precise, there were almost no places that the system forcibly restricted.

Most of the time, it's because a character's condition or specs are lacking.

For example, in previous cycles, the Diamond Warrior was able to forcefully penetrate and infiltrate the floating island, which was otherwise inaccessible, even causing it to fall.

If conditions are met, practically any map can be turned upside down.

– Thunk

Suddenly, my body twitched. It was a minor creak. To most superhumans, such a slight dissonance would be undetectable, but my ears picked it up clearly.

I casually glanced around.

Details of the luxurious train interior were relayed to me. Unlike the usual setup, each seat was partitioned off like individual rooms.

For me, these were exorbitantly high-class seats. Yet, the touch of the handle in my grip was not unfamiliar.

It was similar to the sensation in the dorms. Had I become accustomed to such high-end items?

After leaving Edinburgh Gate Terminal, I immediately boarded a northbound train.

The Hidden Pieces near Edinburgh were not found in the original work, and since I had no purpose for sightseeing, I swiftly scanned the area with my spatial perception and promptly departed.

It was around 4 a.m. local time.

The sun was still hidden in this hour. There's a time difference between Shio-ram, located in the middle of the North Pacific, and Scotland.

A day had already passed by the calendar, but as long as I return based on Shio-ram's time, there's no issue.

'…It's vast.'

Information outside the train shifts endlessly.

Urban areas pass by, and then the scenic splendor of green grassy fields.

Despite the train's relentless travel, new information floods in ceaselessly. At a glance, it all appears similar, yet differences reside in the details.

Continuously receiving such information, I couldn't help but be struck anew by how expansive the world is.

It felt similar to the first time I stepped out of the orphanage.

The difference now is that the sky is out of sight. There are no clouds obstructing the view, no sun, moon, or stars risen.

Back then, it was astonishing to learn that concrete structures weren't the entirety of the world, and odd that no walls appeared no matter how far I walked.

Also, that there were so many people in the world other than myself, and that most of them seemed happier than I was made me feel so…

– Smack

I slapped my cheek just before descending into unnecessary sentimentality. The sting snapped me back to reality.

I shook my head furiously as if exasperated.

'Maybe I really need to visit a mental hospital.'

Rubbing my burning cheek, worries flooded in.

Red flags were raised for my mental health.

Of course, even the original me wasn't exactly mentally sound.

I knew my mental fortitude was on par with a vacant-brained idiot, but lately it seemed to have worsened.

Ever since using Gop-hwa, emotions bubble up unexpectedly, and sometimes, tears fall spontaneously during solitary training at night.

'…Is it dangerous?'

The results from the psychological test I took with Professor Liana a few days ago hadn't come back yet.

Depending on the outcome, I'll need to carve out time to visit a mental hospital.

I felt averse to the idea of attending a mental institution, but it's certainly better than suddenly going insane and hanging myself.

For a superhuman… precisely, for a hero in their prime, mental health is a critically important issue.

We're not ordinary people; we're superhumans. When such powerful individuals lose their minds, the damage isn't limited to minor troubles.

If they truly snap, they could become villains causing significant harm, so managing mental health is an essential virtue for a hero.

Rubbing my cheek with the water bottle I had with me, I felt the transition from nature to city through my spatial perception.

I had reached my first destination.

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My final destination is Shipnaha.

The goal is to acquire the Necklace of Confession, which can be obtained in a dungeon nearby.

But it would be a waste to spend an entire weekend here just for the Necklace of Confession, returning with only that in hand.

There are also gains to be made on the way to Shipnaha.

I planned to spend the whole weekend here, picking up a few easily obtainable Hidden Pieces.

Hidden Piece, a high-tier artifact ‘Jewel of the Lake’

An artifact shaped like a blue gem, it transforms absorbed magic power into water Qi (水氣).

This water Qi has properties of purification and healing, essentially functioning as a semi-permanent healing drug.

For someone sticking to a solo strategy, recovery-type artifacts are crucial, and the Jewel of the Lake is so effective it’s commonly sought even in the later cycles.

I remember its location. At a general store in the northern part of Scotland, it was on sale as clearance—

“Crystal orb? That decorative item sold out years ago. It was taking up space, so we barely managed to sell it off in a clearance sale.”

…Eh.

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…Hidden Piece, a high-tier artifact ‘Spear of Retribution’

A favorite of a hero active during the era of turmoil.

A weapon that roamed the battlefield under the grip of a hero burning with

vengeance against monsters becomes inherently cursed through a series of coincidences.

If wounded by the spear, the wound is seeded with an evil Qi that hinders healing and festers the injury.

When overwhelmed with this evil Qi, it could even induce life-threatening complications.

The description is creepy, but the effect when killing something is outstanding. Most monsters sustain permanent damage with just one strike.

Similarly, this was tucked away in a corner of a small armory shop on the Scottish map. People failed to realize the weapon's functionality due to the curse it bore.

After the 9th cycle, it was frequently sought—

"Ah, I see. About ten years ago, this place was a blacksmith that also sold arms. Business wasn't doing well, so they cleared the stock and moved."

Ack…

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…Hidden Piece, a material item 'Beacon's Horn'

A byproduct of the rare, fantastical species called Beacon, its horn is shrouded in a peculiar Qi, making it a tricky material to handle.

While difficult, if one has the necessary craftsmanship, it can be used effectively.

My own crafting skills are rudimentary, but according to plan, there's someone willing to teach me.

I could commission that person to make some decent weapons, or I could just sell the horn later.

The method of acquisition—

"How about this price for it? Though it's merely ornamental on our end, it should be quite a useful material for your purposes, so this price is fair, wouldn't you say?"

'Oh.'

I didn't expect much. Before considering the previous two failures, Beacon's Horn was a type of Hidden Piece that was desirable but hard to come by.

I nodded vigorously and pulled out some cash from my pocket. Even with technological advancements, the market still preferred cash transactions.

"A good deal indeed."

– Nod

I felt the same. The price was a bit, well, quite expensive by my standards, but it was a bargain compared to the weapons that could be made from this horn.

I reached out my hand, about to grab the distinctively dark horn—

– Whoa!?

The moment it touched my grasp, Beacon's Horn let out an alarmed tremble. It was as if it had touched something that it should never have, a fatal resonance.

I felt the same. Suppressing a wave of nausea, I managed to grasp it, but something fundamental rejected that horn.

The horn and my Qi clashed several times. The horn trembled precariously and then instantly disintegrated into dust.

"……"

"……"

A heap of black dust, once the seller's hand, was scattered by the wind that blew through.

An unexpected silence fell upon us.

The seller's eyebrows trembled. He rubbed the residue of dust in his hand and then said in a timid voice.

"…There was nothing wrong with the product."

No, damn it. So the problem lies with me?

My head throbbed.

The world seemed hateful…

* * *

[The curse 'Misfortune of a Beauty' brings misfortune and unfortunate events your way.]

[Life force is consumed due to the curse 'Misfortune of a Beauty'.]

CHAPTER 73
A CHICK LEAVING THE CRADLE (3)

Of course, before setting foot on Scottish land, I had a plan in mind.

Even a simple trip required a plan, let alone such an important schedule as this. A misstep without planning could waste precious time.

Having departed Shio-ram on Friday evening, I had roughly two days and six hours to myself.

If I had some leeway, I could return on Sunday evening, but if time was pressing, I could afford to return by early Monday morning.

Firstly, I would step onto Edinburgh land via the gate, then reach Shipnaha by train.

However, there was no direct train from Edinburgh to Shipnaha.

Being relatively remote and surrounded by rugged terrain, Shipnaha required several train transfers.

That wasn't an issue. In fact, I planned to consume Hidden Pieces along the way, so transferring was inevitable.

And so, after multiple train transfers and a diligent search for the Hidden Pieces I remembered…

It all went to the dogs.

'Shit.'

Once in Shipnaha, I somehow managed to secure accommodations.

Not being familiar with traveling in foreign lands wasn't much of a concern thanks to my spatial perception.

Just scanning the information within range was enough to find the lodging and route I was looking for.

After completing the procedures, I sat absentmindedly shoving soup into my mouth in the restaurant on the first floor when my brain's calculator started to hammer away on its own.

A tally of numbers appeared, full of minuses and devoid of profit.

Those numbers weighed heavily on me, so much so that I couldn't lift my head and ended up burying it on the table.

My cheek was scraping against the cold touch of the surface.

'Ugh… '

The groan of frustration reverberated inside me. I made an effort not to let it escape my lips, swallowing back tears instead.

Profit… I had rummaged through and found a total of six Hidden Pieces, but only one was secured.

And that single one had convulsed and died the moment it reached my hand.

Cost? There was an expense in obtaining that one.

Exorbitantly so.

While my spending awareness was still at rock bottom, the price was significantly higher due to it being a monster byproduct.

The horn of a Bicorn. Thinking about it again sent heat rushing to my head.

'No… '

Bicorn.

As far as I knew, a fantastical species that has been passed down since the medieval ages of Europe… A fictitious animal, true, but in this world, it exists as a real monster.

Standard hierarchy ranks it as a sixth-tier creature, but considering various factors, it has the potential to surge up to a fifth-tier monster.

Such was the byproduct I had acquired. It was also the horn of a creature commonly referred to as a Bicorn.

Costly, indeed.

The price was lowered because a long time had passed since it was subjugated, and at a glance, it seemed to be in bad condition.

Normally, that would not be a price one could afford just by saving up their maintenance fees.

Such an expensive byproduct… turned to dust upon touching it.

The horn of the Bicorn that had turned to dust in the seller's grip. I wanted to grab the seller by the scruff, who was evading responsibility by claiming it wasn't a product issue…

'Sigh… '

Thinking about it, it seems the problem might indeed lie with me.

Bicorn, as a creature, is often associated with corruption and chaos.

The nature of its magic is erosive and contaminating. That's why wounds inflicted by a Bicorn are particularly difficult to heal.

The characteristics of a Unicorn, on the other hand, are the opposite: purity and innocence. Its magic is clean and possesses a pure quality.

Perhaps due to the difference in the nature of their magic, unicorns are relatively more docile monsters.

Moreover, unicorns and bicorns are almost always mentioned together.

Not just because they are linked in the same mythology but more so because when they encounter each other, they seem to go mad and charge like crazed beasts.

As if unable to tolerate each other's existence, there are numerous rumors of them fighting duels as if they've met a sworn enemy on a narrow bridge.

And the uniqueness of those battles has also contributed to the spread of rumors.

When their contrasting magical natures collide, it supposedly causes an intense backlash phenomenon…

Backlash phenomenon.

The magic of Bicorn is corruption and chaos.

The magic of Unicorn is purity and innocence.

My magic? Pure, clean…

Since the moment I first observed the Bicorn's horn, even without spatial perception, there was a feeling of revulsion stirring in my gut from just the magic alone.

The moment of contact, as if our energies couldn't acknowledge each other, the fluctuating energy of the horn and my own magic…

I racked my brain. I started putting together the scattered puzzle pieces.

Rational suspicion.

Rather than hypothesizing that the Bicorn's horn was a defective product, the weight of my guess was tipping towards it having shattered due to a collision with my magic…

'No… How could I have known… '

I am no unicorn.

It felt incredibly unfair. Who would have guessed that just touching it would cause it to crumble to dust?

And so instantly? That it would just turn to dust like that. I have no idea what its durability is supposed to be like.

Bicorn vs. Unicorn was a spectacle I used to watch often in the original works. I even captured them on purpose to set them up for fights.

The backlash phenomenon wasn't this immediate and intense.

At least not to the point where a horn would shatter upon mere contact…

This was just a case of blame being misplaced. The only mistake I made was not bringing tweezers when I felt the revulsion.

I mindlessly continued shoving food into my mouth, making excuses to myself.

I had ordered a suitable dinner menu, but it consisted mostly of fried foods.

Perhaps due to the climate making it difficult to obtain vegetables and the geographical feature of being near the coast leading to a diet heavy in meat.

As a result, Scottish food is said to be greasy, but with my taste buds, I couldn't ascertain the truth.

By appearance alone, it certainly looked rich and greasy.

…

…

…

I really wanted to immediately head out to the dungeon upon arrival in Shipnaha.

Having already spent time with no harvest made me feel increasingly impatient.

But thinking rationally, I knew that would be unwise.

I had left Shio-ram right after a duel with Professor Atra, and besides briefly sitting and resting on the train, I had taken no breaks.

It wasn't as if my stamina had been completely drained. I felt mentally exhausted, but it was nothing more than a petulant complaint of fullness.

But my destination now was a dungeon.

Not like in Shio-ram, where all traps had been removed, information was abundant, and there was no safety device provided by the Vice-Principal.

A misstep could mean actual death.

Even though my skills were growing rapidly, if asked whether I had enough confidence, my head would involuntarily shake no.

So it was only after at least a short nap that I set out from the city.

Of course, I didn't quite manage an hour's sleep and a nightmare had spoiled my mood, but still, my physical condition had improved somewhat due to the rest.

– Thud

The grade-four dungeon, [Echoes of the Gorge], was located in the middle of a mountain valley.

The terrain around Shipnaha is rugged.

The city itself is surrounded by mountains, making it secluded, with less frequent train access.

I set out in the dawn before the sun had even risen.

I had only a rough idea of the location. Even this much was based on game information, so I planned to take my time finding it.

As expected, it took some time to locate the dungeon. Even with spatial perception, it took time, so without it, it would have probably taken days to find.

"……"

The cataclysm inflicted a deep wound on humanity.

Dungeons sprouting out of nowhere consumed the lands where humans thrived, and monsters that appeared like cockroaches harmed and devoured people.

Such disasters continued for over a hundred years. During that era, it was a struggle just to live like a human.

It was different from now. The peace we had was obtained through the bloodshed of ancient heroes.

If things go as in the original story, this peace will come to an end in a few years, but that's how it is.

That's why such a profession was earnestly called heroic.

The esteem might have dropped relatively in the present day, but in the past, they were indeed treated as heroes.

Those heroes cherished such acclamations and took pride in them.

Heroes considered killing monsters a noble act.

Assaulting dungeons that spawned monsters was also considered a matter of honor.

Because of this, there is a culture of old heroes that is hard to find nowadays.

A culture where, at the site where a dungeon was conquered and left floating, they would carve their or their comrades' traces.

"……"

The Echoes of the Gorge… the place where it should be.

An unnatural clearing right in the middle of a long mountain range.

In the center, a somewhat damaged stele and the names written on it…

——-

May this deed shine as a beacon on a dark day.

Georok Grass.

Denis Bardon.

Richard Carlyle.

Artovan Maxwell.

Trian Slade.

——-

'Ah.'

One of the reasons for my impatience became clear.

This isn't a game but reality. This area is bustling with active hunters. Someone might have already found it or others might have already conquered it.

My head tilted back on its own.

The sky was invisible.

The feathers of the Wings of the Sky draped over my shoulder limply drooped.

'Shit.'

I shouldn't have come out.

What a shitty situation.

* * *

A dungeon relatively close to Shipnaha.

Inside the dimly lit cave, shadows flickered from the faint light source.

– Grrrrrr

Having defeated and devoured all outsiders, the monster let out a satisfied rumble from its throat.

The cave resonated with the sound that was merely a vibration from the throat. Weaker kin busily moved at the sound of the leader.

Red-furred dogs buried their heads, aiming for whatever little flesh was left.

The monster, watching this scene, turned its body and checked its own flesh as it suddenly writhed in pain.

Though regenerating, there were plenty of scars etched between the fur marks.

The outsiders had been strong. Their limbs, devoid of nails and appearing emaciated, were actually imbued with tremendous strength.

Had they fought head-on, even a monster might have found it difficult to defeat them.

That's why it hunted.

It pushed the weaker kin forward to induce carelessness.

The outsiders did not have good night vision. They also didn't make an effort to carefully check their surroundings.

The monster hid its body in the darkness, held its breath, and at the perfect timing, killed the one that seemed to be the leader.

The outsider was strong, but it lacked the regeneration the monster possessed. The beheaded outsider died easily.

The rest were easy and tasty prey.

– Grrrr…

The monster, which could be mistaken for a large boulder, tilted its head.

There was no sky to be seen.

To the monster, born not long ago, the sky was synonymous with the stone ceiling.

It was just a gloomy stone that made up the sky.

But at this moment, something else shone in the eyes of the monster.

The self-awareness of this space.

The space that granted it strength whispered.

The sky was about to open.

CHAPTER 74
STRUGGLES AFTER LEAVING HOME

I should've never left Shio-ram.

That thought struck me as soon as I arrived at the place that once echoed with the sounds of the Gorge.

So much time had been consumed just getting here. Precious time wasted. The terrible outcome made it impossible to arrest such thoughts.

I had spent nearly a whole day trapped on a train. I wasn't just playing around. In the time I could have lain idle, I studied for written subjects and jotted down theories of magic.

I couldn't engage in physical training. Regardless of the train facilities being adequate, they were not conducive to rigorous physical training.

I transferred from train to train, searching for Hidden Pieces.

Applying the knowledge from the original work here wasn't accurate. So, I had to compensate for the lack of information with my own body.

At the end of all that wasted time, I found the site of a dungeon that someone else had conquered and a severely weathered, exhausted stele.

I stood there dumbfounded for a while. My head was spinning. I even felt an irrational urge to destroy the innocent stele.

I turned and fled. If I had stayed there any longer, I felt like my head would have gone strange.

The journey back was anything but smooth. As I was now in a region beyond the city, there were monsters wandering around.

Surrounded by these dangers, I kept my spatial perception fully open, guarding in all

directions as I trudged on. Occasionally, I fended off monsters that charged at me.

Entering the city after completing the outer inspections, my legs failed me before I could even reach my lodging.

I slumped onto a bench arranged in a nearby park.

'Ah… '

The thoughts from earlier continued in my head.

I shouldn't have come here. I should've just stayed in Shio-ram. All for what? Wasting time and assuming unnecessary risks. What was I attempting to confirm by going out on my own? I should've just been crying like a baby, staying in Shio-ram…

The regret was overwhelming, but this was all hindsight. Doesn't everyone regret things this way?

Oh, back then, I should have done this.

The reason for my regret about this trip was that it yielded no significant gain.

If I had even found one Hidden Piece, the time spent wouldn't have felt wasted. In fact, the trip would have been incredibly fruitful compared to the effort.

'To be honest, it's not like I hadn't anticipated this… '

Reality, not a game.

I keep repeating this to myself. It's something I certainly need to know, but because I'm so incompetent, I might think wrongly at any moment.

Therefore, I had predicted that the elements known as Hidden Pieces might have vanished, and indeed, that was the case.

This situation was different from that of the Origin Egg in several ways.

The Origin Egg was inside The Tower of Growth, a place with restricted access, and even if someone found it, they couldn't claim it without the special admission status.

The Hidden Pieces I had searched for this time… no restrictions, no conditions. They were up for grabs by whoever found them first.

They weren't in particularly hard-to-reach places, nor were they associated with special acquisition conditions or high difficulty levels.

That's mainly why I had even attempted to touch these Hidden Pieces. I hadn't mustered the courage to approach the others yet.

I would love to resolve the Curse of Short Lifespan immediately, but as far as I know, there were only two methods for dealing with it on the side of Ip-ha.

One was through a consumable artifact, the Pearl of Ip-ha.

The problem is that the dungeon that spews out the Pearls of Ip-ha is of the first grade.

The standard hierarchy of the monsters that roam there is fifth-tier. And if an alpha creature were to emerge, the hierarchy would jump to the third tier.

If such a creature landed in the interior, not the borderlands, it would trigger alerts even in neighboring countries, and the association would immediately assemble analysis and extermination squads.

To actually set foot in there… honestly, I wonder if it would ever be possible.

At present, I'm not even in a position to make an introduction. While there's a possibility it's been left untouched due to its remote location, whether it has already been conquered is unknown.

The second method would be to conquer a tower to obtain a wish permit.

Specifically, to conquer a tower that has not yet been conquered to earn the authority to bestow a wish to dispel the curse…

'That's madness… '

That method is crazier than obtaining the Pearl of Ip-ha.

I once tried to conquer the tower during the 8th iteration, as the Thunder Strike, and

ran away, thoroughly disheartened.

The difficulty was abysmal. Unlike dungeons, it seemed determined to showcase the difference, raining down traps and waves of monsters, leaving me immediately seeking escape.

Even in the 8th loop, where I could solo up to a third-tier monster, that's how difficult it was.

Of course, had I continued to bash my head against it, maybe it would have been possible, but with the main base (Earth) being compromised at the time, I had no choice but to withdraw.

I had planned to conquer it later, but I got utterly defeated by Baek Ahrin's betrayal.

After all, the only iteration where I actually attempted to conquer the tower was the 11th as the Diamond Warrior.

At least the 8th loop's Thunder Strike, if not the 11th loop's Diamond Warrior level, was necessary to even consider attempting such a feat…

'……'

I became depressed. The possibility of an actual premature death loomed suddenly closer. My hands and feet trembled.

As if resonating with my feelings, the feathers of the wings in the sky trembled too.

I took a deep breath and covered my face.

I didn't want to die. I hated the thought of struggling to death, but my very nature abhorred death even more…

-Click.

'?'

I was in the middle of calming myself.

Through my real-time spatial perception, I felt something steadily approaching me.

It was a young child.

The child, who had tied their hair neatly over one shoulder, walked toward me, then tugged at the tips of the wings in the sky.

‘What’s this.’

There was no malice.

Involuntarily, my head tilted. Curious, I turned towards the child.

The child tilted their head to match mine.

Their neatly braided yellow hair slid off their shoulder. It was an oddly familiar color… like the fluff of a chick.

However, the eyes, unlike those of the person I knew, blinked impassively.

What was their intention? As I pondered this, the child in front of me tapped on their smartwatch.

It looked somewhat familiar.

[Are you okay? Do you need help?]

It was the familiar hologram. Like mine, the letters were displayed on the hologram.

The technology developed by the association that distributed smartwatches… yet, the true essence came from the Tower of Harmony’s power.

I mouthed words silently, then glanced over at the child.

People converse. Naturally, in most situations, speaking is the most convenient.

If they aren’t speaking? There must be a reason.

Like me.

[Hello. No need for help, thank you.]

The child stared at the hologram I had displayed, then nodded their head. There was no verbal response.

'…Complicated.'

I made an odd expression at the sight of the child.

While I appreciated the kindness offered by the child, a sense of self-reproach washed over me. Did I seem so helpless to a child that I needed assistance?

…Thinking about it, maybe I shouldn't feel this way. Am I overestimating myself?

It seemed my mental age was similar to this child's. The things I could do on my own were as few as this child's.

Considering the kindness they showed, perhaps this child is a better person than I am.

Suddenly, my thoughts spiraled into self-deprecation. I shook my head vehemently and tapped on my smartwatch.

[Thank you for your concern. But I am fine.]

The child nodded. Then, they lingered nearby, eventually plopping down on a nearby bench.

…Why aren't they leaving?

'Where are your parents… '

I was about to ask. I stopped midway through the thought. Just in case.

What if they don't have parents? My current question would be rude…

After a brief pondering, I realized it was none of my business. The child didn't seem lost and was quite composed.

They didn't appear to be in any troublesome situation.

Just in case, I fiddled with a bracelet that hung next to my smartwatch.

It was a bracelet equipped with a perception-distortion feature.

The grade was top-notch, capable of perfectly maintaining one of the most difficult perception-distorting magics without recharging for an entire week.

It was the handiwork of the Vice-Principal. Besides, Shio-ram would have provided basic identity protection, so none here should recognize me.

I sighed inwardly at the sight of the child swinging their legs on the bench and leaned back against the backrest.

'Let's go back… '

I had booked a train for the afternoon return.

It was an unexpectedly early return. If I had proceeded with the Echoes of the Gorge conquest, the timing would have been tight.

Despite the quick return, the outcome was practically nil… A bitter result.

I lamented in vain. All I could gather was the information that easily accessible Hidden Pieces had already been claimed.

From now on, I should avoid venturing outside Shio-ram… if possible…

…

Suddenly, a shiver ran down the back of my neck. My sluggish senses snapped to attention.

It was a sensation I had felt once before. I raised my hand and stroked my nape.

Cold sweat seeped out. It was an action I had taken once in the past.

'…This.'

The night before coming to this world. Just before creating my character for the 13th iteration. I had felt this premonition.

A dizzying dread swept over me.

-Boom!

"…?!"

I sprung up from the bench as if kicking it away. The child nearby jumped in surprise, but I could not afford to pay them any attention.

'What's going on, what is it, what's happening?'

I felt in danger, but I couldn't pinpoint why. Confused yet certain about the engulfing sensation, I felt like my chest would burst open.

I gritted my teeth.

My mind wasn't working properly. Not knowing what to do, an idea suddenly came to mind, and I urgently tapped on my smartwatch.

Requesting help. I had no idea what was happening, so I thought of making a survival report and asking for help.

Even if I didn't think it was likely, if this intuition turned out to be a false alarm, I could just explain it away as a sudden scare.

The hologram changed. I accessed the most recent contact.

[Professor Atra]

→ Me: Yes, I will return safely (Yesterday 18:21)

→ Me: Profess… (Now)

-Whoom!

'Argh…!'

Before I could type out the chat, a sudden, massive shock struck my head. To be precise, it was a collision that affected my mind.

As my mind reeled, the hologram flickered and then, with a crackle, vanished.

My spatial perception shook wildly. It was like seeing through the eyes of someone hit by a dump truck.

'Ugh… '

I held onto my dizzy senses. Compared to the first day when my head almost caught fire due to spatial perception, this was nothing.

As I managed to withstand the collision, an overwhelming sense of pressure came from all directions.

As if buried under a massive pile of dirt, my spatial perception shrunk bit by bit. It was a familiar sensation.

-Crash!

Before I could fully grasp the situation, a massive explosion resounded in my ears. The engine of the city roared with successive blasts.

-Ah, aaaah—!

-What's going on, why is there a dungeon without any warning…?

-Protective spells!? Where did all the magic go?!

Various sounds soon filled my ears. Not a single positive thing could be heard.

Fear, pain, agony, chaos… a symphony of negative emotions.

'…… '

The sudden rise in the surrounding mana concentration, the smartwatch connection severed by the sealed-off space, monsters emerging from all around.

I couldn't even swear.

My face went unprecedentedly pale.

* * *

[The “Curse of Vanishing Beauty” brings forth ill-fortune, and misfortune befalls you.]

[The “Curse of Vanishing Beauty” depletes your vitality.]

…

[Player Correction System: Pioneering]

[Adversity approaching the player is detected.]

…

[A “Dungeon Rampage” quest has been initiated.]

…

[The power of “■■ and □□” grows.]

CHAPTER 75
THE DUNGEON RAMPAGE (1)

I walked on in a daze, not wanting to delve into deep thought. The deeper I thought, the more my spirits would sink.

But thoughts don't always follow one's intentions. My mind kept dredging up memories from the past.

Atra's childhood was anything but comfortable. As a young child, barely retaining any memories, she lost her parents.

Though the memories are hazy, as if shrouded in fog, it was likely a monster that caused the tragedy.

Even in this era of peace, incidents involving monsters happened constantly. Atra and her parents were caught up in one such event.

Amidst that chaos, Atra was fortunate enough to survive, and her memories became vivid from the moment she faced death.

The memory of the monster charging at her was all too clear. A body several times her size, a gaping maw dripping with saliva, and countless sharp teeth.

Had it not been for a heroic rescue, Atra would have been torn apart by those sharp teeth.

That dramatic rescue left a deep scar in Atra, who was left alone after the loss of her parents.

She was bereaved. Her parents were not terrible people. Even in her faint memories, they were parents who did their best for their child. They were a pair that truly tried to fulfill their roles as parents.

Naturally, it was heartbreaking. After being sent to a temporary residence, she had spent days and nights in tears. The figures who were akin to gods to her were

devoured by monsters before her very eyes.

It was then that she realized.

If only she had the power, none of this would have happened.

As a child, she didn't understand such a simple thing. The world seemed bright, and she thought it would always stay that way.

But the world wasn't that peaceful. She realized that too late.

Fortune and misfortune come hand in hand. Atra was a case that fit this saying.

She awakened her magic. It was a blessing. She had gained an opportunity to become strong. Though she had not manifested a unique ability, was it not a stroke of luck to have acquired magic?

From her childhood, Atra put in diligent efforts to make her way into the Elementary Academy.

She had awakened her magic. A condition that applied to only a minority of the entire population. She could be considered superior to others in a way.

Back then, in the Elementary Academy, Atra looked around her.

Everyone had awakened their magic. The students before and after her were the same, and most of the professors who taught them were superhumans who had awakened their magic.

There were few weaker than Atra. Many had awakened their magic earlier and had been receiving training longer than she had.

Her confidence was woefully inadequate. There were many around her who were better, and even they could perish at any moment.

So she worked harder.

Didn't others try as well? Sure, they did. There wasn't a lack of those who idled away, but most kids were striving for a future, a higher place to reach.

Everyone had the same amount of time, and it wasn't just Atra working hard while others frittered away.

So she tried even harder. She reduced her leisure time and filled it with training.

She cut down on sleep. Though people talked about recovery time, her regenerative ability was robust, probably because she had just awakened her magic.

Time for play? There was none of that. Whenever her eyes were open, she strived to become stronger.

Even while eating, she practiced manipulating her magic. She fell asleep holding the magic meter and would wake up early in the morning to head to the training room.

Her tender palms would tear and bleed; blisters, large and small, formed on her soles.

Tears of blood were shed sometimes. She even suffered minor internal injuries from magic backlash.

As time passed, Atra graduated from the Elementary Academy with above-average grades.

The top-tier students either manifested their unique abilities or were lucky enough to consume elixirs and receive excellent early education, thanks to their family's help.

In Secondary Academy, she repeated a similar or even more rigorous schedule.

Atra graduated with top-tier grades. She still hadn't manifested a unique ability, but she could fight nearly on par with those who had.

By that time, Atra began to be treated as a promising talent. She even received sponsorship offers.

In the High Academy, her growth was even more pronounced. She wasn't quite ready for active duty, but she was capable enough to hold her own.

After graduating from the High Academy, Atra aspired to enter Shio-ram but failed.

It was frustrating, but she understood.

Atra had achieved top-tier grades, but that was only within her own academy.

There were many institutions nurturing superhumans around the world, and there were many more talented than her.

Even at her best, Atra was still a superhuman who hadn't manifested a unique ability.

Atra wanted to become stronger. So, after graduating from the High Academy, she prepared and headed to the African frontlines.

That choice… she would be lying if she said she didn't regret it. She realized just how sheltered she had been in the academies.

She believed that her survival was more due to fortune than to her basic skills.

Not many dared to venture to the front with skills as rudimentary as hers, and most of those few didn't leave corpses behind when they died.

Surviving after being torn to pieces a few times was down to luck.

At the same time, she began to possess real strength. As she faced real battles, Atra's skills improved dramatically.

Whether it was the nature of real combat or Atra herself that was suited to it, her growth was certain.

Around that time, she manifested her unique ability. It wasn't an innate talent she was born with but one she earned through persistent effort.

It wasn't that she lacked inborn qualities. Atra belonged to the talented group, and the magic of light she possessed became her unique ability.

No matter the reason, Atra became strong. In just a few years, she had grown beyond the level of a promising academy talent to one capable of active duty.

She was a high-ranking hero, active in the borderlands, when she sustained a severe injury.

While repelling a horde of monsters attempting to cross the frontline, she was ambushed by a high-tier monster specialized in stealth.

She barely managed to counter and strike back but ended up with a gaping wound along her side. Using her magic to contain her spillinng innards, she completed the extermination.

It was no minor injury. Had it been a simple wound, she would have healed and moved on, but curse-like magic had settled in the wound.

She had no choice but to take time to recover.

After years, Atra returned to a seemingly peaceful world. Returning to the inlands, commonly known as the interior, Atra found herself with nothing to do.

As a child, she neglected hobbies for mental health in favor of training, and immediately after graduating from the High Academy, she dashed off to the African front, leaving her with nothing to do in the inland.

To begin with, her injuries prevented her from doing anything special.

So she spent days idly killing time until, at last, someone she had a semblance of friendship with contacted her.

It was a message from the High Academy she had attended, inviting her to a reunion. It reached Atra just as she happened to be in the inland.

Though it was terribly inconvenient, she was persuaded and found herself heading to the site of the High Academy where the reunion was being held.

And then.

-Aaaak! How am I supposed to replicate this…?!

She met that child.

…

…

…

I continued to walk aimlessly. Each step crushed the weeds underfoot. Not weeds grown wild, but those touched by human hands.

The surrounding scenery. Inevitably seen by anyone with eyes.

A space as open as a plain, neatly tended weeds, mounds of earth popping up here and there, and the elongated rocks set in front of them…

It was what one might typically think of as a graveyard. A place where the dead are buried and commemorated.

I didn't want to come here. I had determined never to visit. One visit, and it would take days for my heart to untangle from the mess it became.

But I visited every year. Before being a flawed human, to be at least a class above beasts, I had to visit.

Atra didn't consider herself an exemplary adult. If she had a conscience, she wouldn't think so.

If one were to take all specimens and calculate an average, she might rank in the upper echelon.

Atra didn't beat people to death out of annoyance, didn't frequent the shady places indulging in debauchery, didn't cackle at the sight of people killing and being killed, nor did she belong to the class that mocked and trampled on those dying before her eyes.

But that was a poor excuse. How could one include such vermin in statistics? Those bugs didn't belong in any data.

Re-evaluating the statistics for a class considered 'normal' by Atra's standards.

Atra was a subpar adult.

She didn't beat people to death out of annoyance, but she would rough them up if they crossed a line. She didn't haunt the shady places like they were home, but when stressed, she did resort to herbs like tobacco.

She helped people who were dying before her, but even if she had spare time, she wouldn't go out of her way to rescue someone far away.

Top-tier Hero.

A position some aspire to for a lifetime, a noble seat of honor held by a grand hero, but to Atra…

It was nothing more than an encumbrance.

She hadn't ascended to this position with an inherently noble spirit. She just needed the power, and before she knew it, the title was thrust upon her.

'Haa… '

Her legs halted as she crossed the graves.

She paused her breathing for a moment. Her chest felt constricted. An indescribable pressure weighed down on her heart. If it had been an external attack, she could have shrugged it off, but there was nothing she could do about an internal one.

It was a visit that had become almost a custom over the years. She had grown accustomed to it. Atra knelt and pulled out a bottle of alcohol.

It was expensive, but to Atra's wealth, the price hardly made a dent.

She placed the bottle carefully beside the gravestone.

Atra didn't drink often. But her insolent disciple, ironically, had enjoyed the stuff.

Next, she took out a cloth, soaked it in water, and wiped the tombstone. Then, with a dry cloth, she wiped off the moisture.

Years of repetition had made the procedure familiar.

But her fluttering heart never grew accustomed.

After meticulously cleaning the gravestones of her parents as well, Atra stared blankly at her disciple's grave.

Atra was neither a good adult nor a good teacher.

When she took on her disciple, Atra was a top-tier hero.

There was a considerable difference in skill back then. She could hold her head up in any company, but by her standards, she was woefully lacking.

She also had no talent for teaching. To be frank, her strength came more from innate talent than effort.

The only education she had received was during her academy days. On the front lines, she had almost no instruction, just learning on her own by watching and copying.

That's why there were many trials and errors when teaching her disciple.

She lacked both the knack and experience for teaching. As a result, she wasn't sure if she had taught anything properly.

'……'

But those were undoubtedly happy times. Ever since her parents died, she had only thought about strength.

Her life, filled with dreary colors, gained a bit of vibrancy when she met her disciple.

So she might have taught with a bit of indulgence.

Even if it was for training, how could she hit a child? She went easy on them.

She indulged in the child's whining during practice. She didn't always keep a tight rein and played along with the pranks that came her way.

She had an unfounded confidence that the child would do well. The disciple had more talent than Atra herself and was a bright and energetic presence, spreading laughter and happiness around.

She believed the disciple would become a better person than her teacher.

Teacher and disciple… At least the deepest relationship she had ever formed. A very

precious bond.

That bond was severed several years ago. Not by the parties involved but by external interference.

The calamity of the dungeon. That goddamned thing had taken not just her parents but also the disciple who was like family.

The child had lost parents to monsters in childhood, too. Then, having awakened, the child was attending the academy.

Standing at a neglected grave, Atra thought blankly.

This wasn't a child who should have died. Definitely not a child whose life should have ended this way.

Atra's disciple had more talent. A child who was always lively and cheerful, bringing smiles and happiness to those around… should not have had such an ending.

A mere grade-four dungeon rampage. With the disciple's skills, personal safety should have been easily ensured.

But Atra's disciple vanished without a trace, leaving behind only an arm and scattered flesh.

In despair… and regret.

She mustn't have taught like that.

She shouldn't have indulged the whims. She shouldn't have gone easy for fear of hurting, for wanting to avoid pain.

She should have ensured that the disciple was skilled enough to avoid such calamities, to preserve life regardless of the threat.

It was Atra's fault. No matter what others said, she blamed herself.

The worst kind of teacher. A wretch who had led her disciple to death.

Unable to bear such thoughts, she returned to the front lines. She unleashed her guilt

and loathing on the monsters.

She didn't care about the concerns of those around her. She just wanted to expend those dark emotions.

The Principal's request reached her only a few years later… a few months ago, from the present.

'Lee Hayul… '

An undesired… subject of teaching. She taught reluctantly, but memories of the past would not allow her to be half-hearted.

This time, she taught differently. She didn't treat Hayul casually. It might have been hard for a child who had just awakened, especially if not a superhuman.

She was strict, aiming to make Hayul strong as quickly and securely as possible.

While educating Hayul… Seeing the child grimace and cry out in pain, her heart was never at ease, but to avoid repeating the past, she did not stop.

She also tried not to get attached. She would do her best to teach, but one never knows where life will lead. She didn't want to experience the pain of loss again.

-Ugh…

Maybe she did get a little attached after all.

"Phew…"

A deep sigh escaped her. Given the place, her thoughts were in disarray.

-Ding!

That's when her smartwatch alarm rang.

[Hayul]

The contact she was just thinking about. Atra opened the hologram with a complex expression.

→ Hayul: Profess… (Now)

The abruptly ended text. She frowned and opened Hayul's profile.

[Connection Interrupted]

'…What?'

Connection interrupted. Those words filled Atra's eyes.

It was strange. A smartwatch connected by the Tower of Harmony, disconnected?

That phenomenon could only occur in dungeons and towers.

Hayul said he was going to a dungeon. He asked if it was okay to go, glancing around hesitantly, and she nodded.

The connection could be interrupted…

But, if it was inside the dungeon, how could he send such a message? And how did the connection get cut off immediately after the message arrived? Why was the text cut off so awkwardly?

A sense of unease.

'…That can't be.'

Anxiety.

Atra's eyes trembled.

Today is the anniversary of her old disciple's death. The day they left the world.

On such a day, Hayul said he was going to the dungeon. She nodded with a complicated heart at such a coincidence.

On such a day, on the very same day, the same accident happening to the child she was teaching… It made no sense.

-Ding! Ding! Ding!

[At this moment, a dungeon has rampaged without warning in two districts of Shipnaha, Scotland. The isolation of the area is confirmed. Heroes in charge of protection duty in the vicinity are advised to head to the site of the rampage immediately.]

It couldn't be.

CHAPTER 76
THE DUNGEON RAMPAGE (2)

When a sudden event befalls a person, their mind can come to a halt.

When an incident exceeding the bounds of cognition occurs, it can cause one's thought processes to temporarily cease functioning.

'Dungeon.'

I've frequently experienced this in the past, but somehow, I didn't this time.

Perhaps it was the instinct to survive, suggesting that if I let my thoughts freeze now, I might end up dead.

'Rampage phenomenon, there were no warnings. This place has been swallowed. Is it the dungeon's power pressing down on my spatial perception?'

A dungeon's consciousness inherently seeks to persist indefinitely. In any situation, it acts to maintain itself.

That's the reason dungeons create traps and spawn monsters to repel intruders. After all, external enemies tend to have the intent to destroy the dungeon.

Once it fulfills its purpose of self-preservation, a dungeon then turns to greater ambitions.

Perpetuity. Next is the will to expand.

When a dungeon endures and accumulates excess energy beyond a certain point, it goes into a rampage. This is why dungeons that are maintained intentionally require periodic subjugation.

'No precursors?'

Surplus energy. Essentially, a massive force that is readily observable.

The Tower of Observation constantly surveys the front lines of the magical realm. It interprets the movement of monsters that aim to breach the inlands, identifies the presence of high-tier monsters entrenched within, and also observes the hinterlands with the energy left over. It watches for high-risk villains and issues early warnings for dungeon rampages.

There was no warning. A spontaneous event. A rare occurrence, yet post-graduation from Shio-ram, it becomes a disaster that happens as often as one eats meals.

'Damn it.'

Of all times… it has to happen right now, while I'm here.

I suppressed the negative emotions. I bit my lip and stretched out my hand, pulling up the waist of a child who was flustered at my side.

"…!?"

The child jolted in surprise. Unfortunately, now wasn't the time to be considerate. I steadied the child in my arms and pushed off the ground.

I channeled the magic coursing through my body. Using the art of Hardening, my reinforced legs propelled me forward.

The fierce wind hammered against my entire body. I opened my senses wide. Now wasn't the time for excuses like being bothered by my nerves.

The wind carried a variety of sounds to me.

Screams filled with terror, the horrific noise of skin tearing and bones shattering, the booming of buildings collapsing and things exploding, the cries of monsters…

Most were sounds I had heard before.

I had heard screams in the cursed home of my childhood, torn the skin and smashed the bones of monsters during dungeon training, and even taken lives in The Tower of Growth, though it was supposed to be simulated.

But this was reality. Not a drill, and certainly not a safe examination like in the tower.

People had already died. They won't be coming back…

'Shelters.'

Over a century has passed since the history of humanity was ravaged by dungeons and monsters. It may seem an incredibly short time in the grand scheme of human history, but it's been ample time to develop countermeasures.

In most cities rebuilt after the great upheaval, shelters have been constructed considering the possibility of falling under the influence of a rampaging dungeon.

Though they can be used for typhoons, hail, earthquakes, and the like, their primary purpose is to provide refuge from the altered environment caused by dungeons and the monsters that emerge chaotically.

I fully expanded my spatial perception.

The influx of information increased. It wasn't satisfying. Ever since the rampaging dungeon engulfed this place, the state of my spatial perception had been terrible.

It thrashed wildly. As if in a tug-of-war, it repetitively pushed against an exterior force.

It was a sensation I knew well. It was the feeling I got in The Tower of Growth when my spatial perception couldn't fully expand and got crushed.

The outcome was different this time. Back then, I couldn't resist and was just suppressed, but now I was fiercely pushing back against the dungeon's power.

While searching for a shelter, I spotted several monsters.

It wasn't enough to say there were 'several'. Every time space shifted, new monsters appeared.

There was a variety of species, but what dominated in number was a beast with red fur. It moved on all fours, and its body was at least twice my size.

'Red leaf hound?'

Knowledge from the original work and what I learned about monsters at Shio-ram…

together with the information observed through spatial perception, I deduced that it was a red leaf hound.

Red leaf hound. Standard ranking: 7th tier, a level of monster that has resistance against conventional firearms.

So, could the rampaging dungeon be class 4? It's a relief amidst misfortune. If it had been class 3, the chances of survival would have drastically decreased.

I flicked my fingers. The magic I wielded formed a barrage of spell formulas.

Magic bullets.

The magical projectiles traced a blue path through the air, striking the head of the red leaf hound.

Bang! The red leaf hound's head exploded with the blast, and fragments of the split skull and shattered brain scattered in all directions.

I flicked my fingers again. A series of newly formed magic bullets dispersed in all directions.

– Bang! Bam! Bang!

I fired magic bullets at all the monsters entering my spatial perception. The monsters' heads burst open where the magic bullets struck.

I wasn't worried about accuracy. Thanks to my spatial perception, the projectiles hit their mark almost every time.

'I found it.'

While reducing the number of monsters, I located a shelter.

The entrance of the shelter looked like one you'd typically find on a bunker. A thick metal door now stood wide open, invitingly.

Surviving citizens were filing into the entrance that led underground.

On either side of the entrance, two superhumans with anxious expressions looked

around. Judging by their aura, they weren't particularly strong.

"Hey, hey! Over here!"

One of the superhumans caught sight of me. He widened his eyes and waved his hands. Thankfully, there was no misunderstanding that I was a villain.

After I landed in front of the entrance, I set down the child I was carrying. The child, with hair in disarray, struggled to regain balance, looking dizzy and disoriented.

In the meantime, the superhuman who had been waving at me spoke in an urgent tone.

"You must have grasped the situation, too – most of the city has been isolated, swallowed by the rampaging dungeon!"

I knew that already. Anyone who hadn't grasped the situation was either immediately killed by the rampage or was no longer around.

"We need to buy time until the rescue team can break through the outer wall! So…!"

I also knew what would come next.

Modern citizens receive education on what to do in such emergency situations. Right now, survivors are desperately flocking to the shelter.

Many might be unable to gather due to the monsters strewn about.

I nodded and was about to take off again.

– Thump

That's what I intended, but my sleeve was yanked, stopping my leg mid-motion. The culprit was the child I had brought with me.

The child, with an urgent look, was tugging at my sleeve.

Eyes that seemed bored, half-closed before, were now wide open, revealing fear-filled pupils.

Had this child seen me somewhere before? The thought crossed my mind but was immediately dismissed. Even if they had seen me, they wouldn't recognize me now.

The bracelet of identity obstruction, personally cared for by the Vice-Principal. With this, my current appearance would seem entirely different.

That is to say, even if they knew Lee Hayul, my current appearance was not that of Lee Hayul's outward look. Since I kept my magic well under control, it was impossible for them to think of me as Lee Hayul.

'Don't worry.'

I wanted to say that, but I couldn't because of the curse. I could have used a hologram to convey my intentions, but I didn't want to waste the time.

I shook off the small hand. It came free easily, as the hand had no chance against my strength.

A pair of eyes, resembling someone, drifted away. I kicked off the ground again and raced across the city.

Shipnaha came into my spatial perception. It wasn't a particularly beautiful or artistically valuable city.

Shipnaha had come into existence only decades after the great cataclysm, its origins stemming from a city built by the heroes and hunters who gathered to subjugate the nearby dungeons.

Hence, this place was characterized more by practicality than artistic value.

The city was falling apart. People were dying everywhere. The spatial perception that struggled in a tug-of-war with external forces delivered the situation all too well.

It made my head clear. All trivial thoughts, including the fear of death, were pushed to the back of my mind due to the gravity of the situation.

I shook my hand again. The magic released from my grasp sketched out spell formulas. I focused on neutralizing one monster with each shot.

There was no leisure to hold a weapon and kill one by one. Even if it meant a bit

more magic expenditure, it was better to use magic to kill.

The depleted magic quickly recovered. There was fatigue accumulating in the circuits and core, but there was no time to indulge in such complaints.

To survive, to save more people, this crisis had to be dealt with. I racked my brain.

'The rampage must be quelled.'

A dungeon is a vast sub-space attached to the world, likened to a ship temporarily anchored by dropping its anchor.

To stop the ship, the anchor must be dropped. If the anchor is pulled out, the ship gets swept by the current and drifts in the ocean.

The same goes for dungeons. If its core is destroyed, the dungeon cannot sustain itself and will collapse.

'Where is the core?'

There are various kinds of cores. It could be a structure that looks special, an abnormally large mana crystal compared to others.

Or, it could be a monster that has taken on the role of the core.

Naturally, monsters that are dungeon cores are labeled alpha. Such monsters are particularly dangerous, even among alpha specimens.

A monster serving as a core never leaves the dungeon's sphere of influence. Therefore, it feasts on the dungeon's blessings, wielding power far superior to other creatures.

'Has class 4 gone on a rampage?'

I felt my spatial perception. It kept undulating, but it was functioning as well as it could.

A pressing sensation came from all around… Upon closer analysis, there wasn't just one or two sites of manifestation. At least five or more…

‘Damn it.’

Is everything class 4? If so, the standard ranking of the emerging monsters would be around class 8. What about the alpha specimen? Probably class 6…

‘How can this be dealt with?’

I had seen a parasitic moth in The Tower of Growth that was an alpha of class 5. That thing is dead. Hong Yeon-hwa killed it, and I had a hand in its defeat.

I’ve grown since then. Can I kill it now? I wasn’t confident.

I hadn’t confirmed yet whether there was an alpha serving as a core, but if there is one, to stop the rampage, the alpha must be killed.

If not killed? There is another way. Wait for external rescue.

Communications have been cut, so the outside world must have been aware of the city’s situation by now. The Association will immediately send a rescue team composed of the highest-class and upper-class superhumans available here.

The outer walls of a dungeon are solid. Before a rampage, one wouldn’t dare touch them, but the walls of a rampaging dungeon become somewhat softer.

Even more so for the lowest-ranked, class 4 dungeons. If pounded from the outside, surely the outer walls will crumble and the rescue team will enter.

…How long will it take? It’s a class 4, so there’s a chance of rescue.

From class 3 upwards, rescue from outside is virtually impossible, and even class 4 would take at least twice as long as half a day to breach the walls.

How many will die in that time?

And…

‘Why are there so few superhumans?’

Can they even hold out for that long?

I continued to lessen the number of monsters while pondering these questions.

For some reason, there weren't many superhumans around that I came across immediately. Surely, there should be a clan responsible for the city's defense, but I hadn't encountered any such individuals.

There's a shortage of manpower. There are too few superhumans subjugating monsters. And I don't see any that seem to be at least mid to high-level. Why?

'Damn it… '

The situation is bad. As the possibility of survival seemed to dim, my face involuntarily twisted in frustration.

– Rrrrick

Suddenly, I heard something being torn apart. It sounded close, but I couldn't identify what it was.

* * *

[The ability 'Power of the ■■ and the ■■■' has grown.]

CHAPTER 77
THE FIRST TRIAL

-Kuhurheng!

A beast charged forward. Red fur whipped in the wind. A gaping maw opened wide as a howl erupted and spread through the air.

Red leaf hound. Easily twice my size. If seen with eyes, it would have obscured all in view.

As I considered this, I couldn't help but fixate on the hound's red fur.

As the name 'red leaf hound' would suggest, it would naturally have red fur… but through spatial perception, I also observed 'human blood' in its fur.

Especially around the muzzle.

Gritting my teeth…! I clenched my fist, pouring abundant magic into it and employing the art of Hardening, covering it all with Qi.

I didn't like the look of that muzzle. I brought my fist down from above, striking downwards.

-Bang!

Flesh compressed, hard substances beneath shattered. A disgusting sensation of something soft bursting within followed through my fist.

The once-agape muzzle snapped shut. Upper and lower teeth clashed and broke from the impact. It was somewhat comical to see eyeballs popping out due to the shock.

One was dead. But one red leaf hound wasn't all.

Even amidst the struggle with the dungeon's power, spatial perception did its job.

Two more hounds were charging from behind. I immediately manipulated my magic.

Whooosh! The sky's wing feathers, hanging like a cloak, unfolded.

'Shape-shifting.'

The edge of the sky's wing feathers, sharpened like blades, were launched.

Crunch! The forefront hound's brow was pierced. Contrary to its usual fluttering appearance, it neatly punctured through skin and skull.

As one fell with its brow speared, another hound continued its charge.

I pushed more magic into the sky's wing feathers. Swoosh! The feather sliced through the skull, grazing the neck of the oncoming red leaf hound.

-Slash

Blood gushed from the cut. The hound's round eyes bulged then went limp, collapsing to the ground.

The skidding red leaf hound slid near. Quickly approaching, I raised my foot. Infusing it with magic and wrapping it in Qi, I brought it down with all my might. Crunch! A sizable head crumbled, and blood pooled on the ground.

Frowning, I took a few steps back. Due to its size, it bled profusely.

Using spatial perception, I scanned the area meticulously. Was there a chance I missed something?

The area was awash with red. Not just from the blood spewed by this creature, but also due to the piled-up bodies of monsters everywhere.

All nearby monsters were dead. After confirming this, I turned my head.

A short distance away, in the rubble of a collapsed building, there were people hiding. One man, one woman, and a child squeezed between them, seemingly a family.

I tried to speak…

‘Now it’s okay… okay… damn muzzle.’

I shut my mouth and tapped my smartwatch.

Though the connection to the outside was severed, the basic functions built into it were intact. It was a feature derived from the power of The Tower of Harmony, and it would be problematic if even this were impossible.

[You are now safe. Please move quickly to the evacuation route.]

“Thank you, thank you so much…!”

The man bowed continuously in thanks.

With disheveled hair and dust all over, and clothes torn and stained with faint blood, he looked like a refugee.

Seemingly out of his mind, he hurriedly offered thanks and turned towards the direction of the shelter.

The woman, who also looked as ragged as the man, quivered with fear as she struggled to move her trembling legs.

Yet, despite all of this, the hand holding the child was firm, which was nothing short of remarkable.

-Hoo…

I scanned the direction they were heading with my spatial perception one more time. Confirming no monsters, I let out a breath loaded with fatigue.

Nearly two hours had passed since I got caught up in the dungeon’s rampage.

After delivering the child to the shelter…

Without rest, I roamed the areas ensnared by the rampage, slaying monsters and rescuing people who were unable to evacuate and guiding them to safety.

My spatial perception was superior to the observation abilities of most high-level superhumans. Finding those who hadn’t been able to evacuate was my forte in this

space.

Killing monsters wasn't difficult either. The dungeon's rank was class 4.

The standard rank of the emerging monsters was at most class 8, and considering the influence of the dungeon, they did not exceed class 7.

The red leaf hounds I'd just dealt with were class 7. I had taken down hundreds of them. It wasn't difficult, but the process was draining in many ways.

I took a moment to check my condition.

It was just exhaustion. Though my physical strength was fine, I was overworking my circuits and core to compensate for the expended magic.

In The Tower of Growth, it was somewhat manageable.

Partly due to intentional overuse to induce growth, and partly because the concentration of mana inside the tower was so extraordinary that the slightest absorption caused it to surge.

Here, inside the rampaging dungeon, the concentration of mana had greatly increased… but it couldn't compare to the interior of The Tower of Growth.

'I should be thankful it's only class 4.'

I kept killing monsters. Almost all were red leaf hounds, and they were at most class 7.

Occasionally, I encountered other superhumans. Most were out destroying monsters, while some moved in parties to rescue people.

Though few in number, the fact that other superhumans besides me were caught up in this offered some solace.

I too saved people. I guided those too terrified to leave the buildings to the shelter and consistently took down monsters on the evacuation routes.

There were many dead.

'……'

I chewed on my lip. People had been caught in collapsing buildings due to the aftereffects of the dungeon's rampage. Many were killed… devoured by suddenly appearing monsters.

Spatial perception conveyed it all without filter.

Bodies crushed into a pulp by heavy buildings, pieces of corpses left behind because the monsters couldn't swallow them entirely, resembling mashed flesh inside monster bellies…

'Damn it.'

Nausea welled up. I wanted to vomit everything out, but there was no time for that.

While I was busy retching, the bodies could pile up. It wasn't so bad that I couldn't bear it.

It was the same now. I quickly checked my status and jumped off. Stepping firmly on the building's outer walls, I climbed to the rooftop and leaped across to the next one.

I felt the performance of my body anew. To ascend to a building's rooftop with a few hops and to move by jumping from one rooftop to another was unimaginable in the past.

'Are there any survivors left?'

The dungeon's rampage hadn't swallowed the entirety of Shipnaha.

Several dungeons rampaged together, expanding their reach, but even if Shipnaha belonged to a small town, it was too much to swallow it whole.

However, a significant portion was consumed. At least half of it was within the range, and many people were caught up in it.

Thankfully, being a small town, Shipnaha had fewer people. If it had been a part of a larger city with a dense population… I didn't want to imagine it.

'……'

The dungeon's rampage. A representative calamity of this world.

The reason for the loss of territories, including modern Africa, and if the story proceeds as it does post-graduation from Shio-ram, a trivial disaster that will come as often as meals.

A disaster that pales in comparison to the invading towers that may awaken in the future.

If I survive here, if I graduate from Shio-ram unscathed… and when a decent future is assured, what should I do?

Should I stand against it? The thought made my head spin. I was too frail to face such a calamity…

-Hoo…

I exhaled and inhaled. Pushing the emerging thoughts aside, I gathered information through my widely open spatial perception.

Enough time had passed. As superhumans, including myself, continuously led survivors to the shelter, my spatial perception no longer picked up survivors but was filled with monsters.

I scattered the prepared spells. It was time to conserve magic.

Initially, I cleaned up the wandering monsters out of fear they would attack people, but now there weren't any people left to attack.

'Maybe it's time to head to the shelter.'

I roamed around the area affected by the rampage several times. Having scanned with spatial perception, I needn't worry about missing anyone.

I turned around. All those who could be saved were saved. What remained were corpses that couldn't be saved.

If I had been considering necromantic villains or monsters, it would have been appropriate to clear out each one I encountered… but now it wasn't necessary.

It didn't take long to reach the shelter. Using Hardening to leap across rooftops, I arrived quickly.

The entrance to the shelter came into the edge of my spatial perception. Around it, the bodies of monsters were piled up like mountains.

When I first arrived, there were perhaps only two guarding the entrance, but now five or six were keeping watch.

The feeling I got from them… they seemed weaker than me. Was it a testament to my monstrous growth? I pushed off the ground once more with a peculiar expression.

'……!'

I was about to leap when a sharp intuition pierced my spine.

It wasn't just a feeling; it was an intense intuition. Ever since creating the 13th cycle, I no longer dismissed intuitions as purely negative.

Now… even more so. Regardless of the process, the simple fact that danger was imminent struck my mind directly.

No process? I might be wrong. Right now, at the far end of the shelter, on the edge of my spatial perception, a beast with red fur entered.

A canine beast with red fur. It should have been a red leaf hound… but I couldn't think that.

It had red fur. That much was the same. But it was different. Compared to the filthy blood of a typical red leaf hound, the quality of the blood enshrouding its fur was disgustingly distinct.

It was huge. This thing was even larger. A regular red leaf hound might be about twice my size, but this was four times as large.

It stood on two legs. That made it feel even more massive. Spatial perception observed this monster.

From a distance well over several hundred meters, the beast's round, blood-red eyes stared directly at me.

A killing intent pounded against my body. My limbs would have seized up had it not been for the instinct to survive, which thankfully moved my body.

I stopped, following my intuition. It was the same now.

I pulled up magic without thinking of the consequences.

Excessively employing Hardening.

I wrapped myself in a thick layer of Qi.

I didn't stop there and spread out the sky's wing feathers around my body.

Drawing the sword I hadn't needed to unsheathe before, I constructed defensive spells in front of me.

Spatial perception had never missed an opponent's attack.

On the day of the freshman welcoming party, when I collided with Hong Yeon-hwa, it showed up, but my body didn't move in time to avoid the collision.

The same with Katsuki Yusei, who flew at me. Even though I observed them, my body didn't follow.

It was the same with the duel against Professor Atra. Of course, she must have been holding back, but I saw every attack. I couldn't dodge because my movements were inferior.

Now, as well, it was the same.

I saw the attack.

The body that crushed the ground entirely and leapt, the thick foreleg pulled back with great force and swung, the blood-mist shrouding it…

-Crack!

The defensive magic didn't stand a chance and was pierced instantly.

The drawn sword was cut as if sawed through, powerless. Even surrounded by Qi.

Then the sky's wing feathers were torn, and the Qi wrapped around my body followed suit.

The massive foreleg approached. Its size alone was more than enough to cover my upper body.

-Bang!

My mind grew hazy. Already burdened mentally by spatial perception, a tremendous agony raced through my physical form.

I was flung from the rooftop. My body, which fell from the height, scraped the wrecked road as it crashed down.

-Crack-crack!

I thought I might scream. Thankfully, the shock was too sudden for a sound to escape.

My dazed consciousness snapped back into focus, clearer than before.

Because I felt death. My eyelids trembled with pain. I assessed my body through spatial perception.

A chunk of my left forearm was gouged out. No bone was exposed, but I felt its absence.

That attack. If any defensive element had been lacking, I would have died. Not just an arm torn off, but it would have ripped through my stomach.

-Thud!

Rough vibrations from the ground jolted my body. Not far from me, on the road, the giant beast had landed.

-Rumbling…

A growl echoed, belching out from its throat. The unique cry of a beast rang in my ear.

Though I'd heard it incessantly over the past few hours, the monster's sound felt entirely different.

'…That one.'

It reminded me of a similar creature. No, it was almost identical to an entity I remembered from the original work.

With my mind sharpened by the proximity of death, memories of the original work were rapidly sifted through to pull out similar information.

〈Savior〉 didn't assign a specific final boss.

There were several entities that felt like final bosses, but the game system didn't definitively mark any.

Nor were there only as many as presumed to be the final bosses; there were many just as strong.

'…… '

The creature's name, Blood-Cloud Aerulus.

By the Association's ranking system, it was an alpha of class 3.

A beast that would devour several top-tier heroes in the distant future.

That creature, not yet fully grown, was now baring its teeth right in front of me.

* * *

[Player Adjustment System: Pioneering Score]

[Detecting a trial approaching the player]

[Quest 'Beast of the Red Mist' initiated]

…

[The player faces a crossroads]

CHAPTER 78
BLOOD CLOUD (1)

Monsters are usually referred to en masse by their species.

Red leaf hounds, or Red Hounds, are designated as standard rank 7, and any variants beyond that are simply termed alphas and left at that.

Although individual monsters may have their differences, these are not significant enough to distinguish separate species.

But this one was different.

Blood Cloud Aerulus.

A monster so unique that both the Association and the player's system deemed it worthy of a sobriquet and a personal name.

Classified as rank 3. Among them, it is considered an alpha specimen.

In "Savior," this creature is ranked quite high among the monsters wreaking havoc in the world.

There has never been a cycle where Aerulus has been fatal. However, many cycles have encountered it.

A cycle that has captured Aerulus? There was one. But it was never a clean hunt.

It wasn't until the 8th cycle that we began to stably subdue class 3 creatures.

All cycles before that either had middling specs or, even if superior in output, were riddled with sloppy flaws.

The 9th cycle sought a malicious route but met its end midway due to straying from the path.

Only the 8th, 10th, 11th, and 12th cycles were capable of subduing rank 3 creatures or higher on their own.

'Damn it.'

There it stood, a monster with such potential.

Naturally, it isn't a rank 3 at the moment.

If it were, there would be no survivors.

-Kraaaaaaaah!

Still, to me, it was a monster.

Its roar overpowered. My clothes whipped wildly. The deafening roar and intense murderous intent left my complexion pale.

Momentum. Should I call it aura? Even with spatial perception, I gauged the level of that thing.

It seemed no different from the rank 5 creature burned to ashes by Hong Yeon-hwa.

A dreadful reality made my fingertips tremble. I steadied my unstable breathing and assessed my condition.

Below my left forearm, the sensation was faint. Flesh gouged out… Had I felt that pain in full, I might have screamed.

Magic is… more than half remains. The core and circuits cry out in pain from overuse. Except for the forearm, the rest of my body is somewhat intact.

Armed status. The supply sword I brought was reduced to junk while defending against Aerulus's foreleg.

The sky's wing feathers are slowly regaining their form, thanks to the magic poured into them. They would have become junk from that attack if they didn't have a recovery function.

'Damn it.'

Damn, damn, damn.

I nearly died. My head cooled eerily.

It's not about might die. This isn't some training from the cradle. It's not like getting caught in a rampage; one wrong move and I'm dead.

Death was at my doorstep. Without spatial perception, without mapping my senses, I would've groped in the darkness, death flickering before me.

Defensive magic, a sword used as a shield, the sky's wing feathers, Qi enveloping my whole body, and Hardening technique at full throttle.

Had anything been missing, I would have died.

My life would've ended. I would've ended up like the countless corpses I sensed through spatial perception.

'I have to run… '

I must go. There's no reason to hesitate.

Fighting that thing means death. My survival instincts were screaming.

Isn't my life the most important? Isn't everything else trivial?

I've always been selfish. My pursuit of strength, my struggle to become stronger, was all for my own survival.

With that thought, I dragged my feet back.

Information from inside the shelter crept in. There was no time to filter.

I couldn't capture it all. Only fragments of information entered.

Fear and anxiety. The shelter's interior, though summarized, was overwhelmed by chaotic emotions.

I am selfish.

I wondered.

Then, why did I save that person?

There was nothing to gain, almost died in the process, nearly lost a leg, so why did I move?

‘You were born to be unwanted filth, huh?’

Because it’s unfair. Because I had to reject that statement. If I had stayed still, it would seem like I was affirming those words.

I gritted my teeth. Liquid, not saliva, sloshed in my mouth. A sharp pain woke my senses.

I stirred up magic. The creaking core spewed out magic. Using the magic circulating through my body, I employed the Hardening technique.

I dragged my foot forward.

Whoosh! Qi, engorged with ample magic, violently encased me.

-Rumble!

Thunder sounded. The epicenter was the monster, Aerulus. Over its already blood-like fur, a crimson mist swirled.

Unique abilities aren’t exclusive to superhumans. Even if the terminology differs, even if the manifestation and operation differ, entities other than humans can also have unique abilities.

Monsters too. Most are grouped under racial traits, but distinct individuals like that one definitely possess unique abilities.

“Blood Cloud.”

A unique ability that manifests a mist as if made of blood.

That Blood Cloud serves as Qi. Merely wrapping it around the body enhances specs, becoming both a sturdy armor and a weapon that tears enemies apart.

-Crack!

I kicked off the ground. It wasn't my footsteps but the monster's. Asphalt crumbled, sending the behemoth hurtling forward.

Fast. The specs were overwhelmingly in its favor. If we moved simultaneously, I would be at a disadvantage. I had to anticipate its movements and act first.

I predicted the movement with spatial perception. Holding the sword, now virtually useless, in a reverse grip, I threw it. The Qi-wrapped sword sliced through the air.

Aerulus did not react. It didn't even attempt to defend.

-Clang!

Metal clashed against metal. The sword collided with the mist and shattered, sending fragments scattering.

'Of course, no damage.'

Aerulus closed in. As the distance narrowed, my spatial perception creaked.

'An alpha.'

I abandoned the hopeful thought. This was undoubtedly an alpha specimen, actively backed by the rampaging dungeon.

Meaning, Aerulus is the core and the center of the dungeon. The place where Aerulus stands is the center of the dungeon, where the power of the dungeon is strongest.

The force pushing against spatial perception grew stronger. It interfered with gathering information. My expression contorted in frustration.

A thick foreleg reached out. Even the long claws were wrapped in Blood Cloud.

I extended a hand, imbued with Qi, keeping in mind the injury in my left forearm and stretching out my right hand first.

-Crack!

Blood Cloud and Qi clashed. An absurd repulsion transmitted through my arm. It felt as if my hand would break at any moment. Gritting my teeth, I altered my trajectory.

Swoosh! I narrowly deflected Aerulus's thick foreleg which dug into the ground.

Had I been struck by that attack, my flesh would've been sliced like tofu. A chilling premonition flickered through my mind.

'I can't allow an attack.'

I learned from taking the hit; the fundamental difference in mass was too great.

I barely survived the last time, but if I kept allowing hits, I would end up as minced meat.

-Crack! Bang! Swoosh!

I was now fully engaged in combat. Constantly deflecting attacks. Missed attacks scraped across the surroundings.

The trajectory of the claws brought down buildings like falling dominos.

Asphalt cracked and split. Abandoned vehicles on the road were sliced, leading to rugged explosions.

My skill was superior. It was ridiculous to judge a beast's technique, but it was thanks to the gap in skill that I could deflect the attacks.

Having handled numerous weapons during the duel with Professor Atra, I was most familiar with using my hands and feet.

I had to throw punches when I lost my sword, and I had to swing my legs.

Thanks to that experience, I could deflect the monster's attacks.

-Crash!

Chunks of Qi were sheared off. No issue there. I refilled the gouged-out Qi.

The energy hardened even more than before. Magic consumption was like a gaping

hole, but I pushed my circuits and core to their limits, pulling up more magic.

For now, it wouldn't be destroyed with one blow. I could withstand a hit or two. As long as the attack wasn't as sudden and full-powered as before, I could manage.

The spent Qi could be restored.

But…

-Tsk.

With my spatial perception groaning, magic recovery also became less satisfying.

The damage accumulated in my body. Although I was deflecting the attacks, the stress transferred to my body was inescapable.

I didn't plan for a prolonged battle, but I couldn't last as long as I hoped.

What about a short-term battle? Could I kill it?

I looked for an opportunity. Its foreleg swooped down. A shadow cast over my body.

The motion was large. Generally, that's why I could deflect the attacks and occasionally land my own.

I twisted my body. The edge of Qi barely grazed as Aerulus's foreleg passed close. I spread my left hand.

"Magic Slash: Barrage."

The unleashed slashes enveloped Aerulus. Thanks to the size difference, the swarm of slashes struck its flank.

I cut through the red mist. In the process, many slashes were lost. The remaining slashes reached its fur.

-Crunch-crunch-crunch!

The bristling fur blocked the slashes. No matter how reduced in power, it only managed to slightly fray the fur.

-Kraaaaa!

My eardrums fluttered. Angrily, I quickly kicked off the ground to retreat.

Where I had just been, a massive muzzle snapped closed. Crunch! The clashing teeth produced a chilling sound.

Aerulus raised its head, whimpering. Between its grinding teeth, the remnants of the sky's wing feathers were tangled.

I surveyed Aerulus through spatial perception. There were faint scars where the slashes had struck.

Can it be killed?

'Impossible.'

Aerulus, looking similar to the parasitic moth, died from a direct hit of Hong Yeon-hwa's blooming attack.

I don't have that level of output.

Gop-hwa? I haven't used it since that day. I've wanted to many times, but this damned ability doesn't obey its master's will.

-Rrrrrrr…

I wasn't dead yet. If hit squarely with one blow, it would be the end, but I continuously deflected attacks while mindlessly destroying the landscape.

Perhaps it was an obstruction, Aerulus's neck resonated. A sound like scraping iron with a spike echoed.

Then, its two forelegs lifted. The Blood Cloud wrapped around them swelled and bulged.

A clear sign of a powerful onslaught. My intuition rang with it.

If hit, I would die.

Should I block? Can't block. Even if I could, I would die.

Should I dodge again? Intuition shook its head.

The sensation of malice and the force of magic hammered the ground.

Not forward, but backward. I increased the distance from Aerulus.

-Rrrrr!

An ominous howl. It felt as if it was mocking me. Thump! The Blood Cloud surrounding its forelegs swelled again.

Due to the similarity in color to the fur, the forelegs seemed to nearly triple in size.

No, it was just the forelegs. They stretched upwards, long enough to reach the relatively intact rooftops of the commercial buildings.

Then, Aerulus's hind legs swelled. Muscles inflated like balloons, and Blood Cloud wrapped around them.

'Right.'

If the opponent moves away, just get closer yourself.

Bang! The ground behind Aerulus surged.

Instead, Aerulus's form shot forward, with its several times swollen forelegs coming along.

The sky disappeared from view.

The sunlight was blocked. My immediate surroundings darkened.

From above to below.

The sky-obscuring foreleg descended.

* * *

I kicked the ground, and a rough gust followed.

The force broke trees and shrubs, laying them flat. Dirt sprayed in all directions, and broken tree fragments exploded with them.

The clear destruction of nature, but Atra paid it no mind.

There's no gate terminal in Shipnaha.

The nearest gate terminal is Edinburgh Gate.

From there, Atra raced in a straight line without rest.

Lee Hayul was caught up in a dungeon's rampage.

The dungeon's rank is merely class 4.

The standard tier of monsters pouring out is at most class 8. Considering the dungeon's backup, it's about class 7.

Given Lee Hayul's abilities, surely he could survive.

I used to think that way.

That child would be fine. Objectively assessing and even Atra thought so.

And then, that child vanished, leaving behind only a cold arm.

'Please.'

Atra's face twisted in misery. The nightmares of the past superimposed on the present.

'Just be alive.'

If alive, anything can be healed. There are many ways to heal in this world. Somehow, as long as you're alive, it can be fixed.

Just repeating that, not thinking of what's behind, Atra used the Hardening technique to traverse mountains and rivers.

A golden line was drawn across the sky.

CHAPTER 79
BLOOD CLOUD (2)

Close combat was not the answer.

As I sensed the range of destruction from the upheaval of the road, a new realization dawned on me.

-!

The most intense roar I had ever heard burst my eardrums. A high-pitched ringing ensued. Rubble pelted my body.

'Damn it.'

The size had grown, affording me some leeway to dodge, but it was a narrow escape, almost turning me into dried fish.

It hurt. I surveyed the surroundings with spatial perception.

That bastard must be an alpha, for it had brought a horde of monsters. Countless creatures swept through the area.

The ones who had been barricading the shelter had now crumbled, engaging in individual fights.

Thankfully, the door to the shelter was firmly shut. Had it been open… that horde of monsters would have charged towards it.

'Ugh… '

My left arm was in pain.

I hadn't fully evaded the impact. Perhaps because I was slightly within the area of influence, the flesh on my already Qi-depleted left arm was torn off again.

Now it was even more difficult to move my left arm. The exposed bone where the wound was gave me chills. It was puzzling that it was still functional.

Is it because I'm a superhuman? Had I not been, I might have died from shock.

I cast a minor healing spell and wrapped my arm with sky's wing feathers like a bandage.

Mist rose in clumps, slowly engulfing the surroundings. Even then, Aerulus's eyes were locked precisely on me.

'Close combat isn't the answer.'

If I got pummeled at close range, I wouldn't last long. It was the same with just grazing and deflecting attacks. It merely extended time a bit.

Then, I must strike from a distance.

I had no arrows or bow to shoot, no bullets or gun to fire from afar, no tools to throw at a distance.

But I had something else. I steadied my breath and brought my hands together. It was akin to a starting pose. Maintaining calm, I expelled the magic from within my body outward.

-Wooong!

The magic formed into a spell. A simple structure. The spell was easy on magic consumption and not burdensome to cast repeatedly.

'Magic Bullet.'

Magic spheres created behind me were shot forth. It didn't end with one. As soon as they were formed, they were propelled without delay. Countless magic bullets rained down on Aerulus.

-Boom!

Explosions enveloped Aerulus. It didn't stop at a single blast. The magic bullets that collided with the blood mist erupted.

They didn't inflict damage. The magic bullets only slightly disturbed the Blood Cloud without breaking through.

But they brought explosions. I modified the spell to increase the explosive force. I couldn't inflict damage, but the successive blasts could push back. The continued explosions pushed Aerulus's advances.

-Rumble!

First came the growling. The ground torn up by Aerulus followed.

A rapid leap. Spatial perception wasn't fooled. I quickly twisted my body.

A violent slicing sound grazed my ears. My earlobes tore. I swallowed the now-familiar pain.

I twisted my waist. Qi wrapped around my legs flared violently.

I was about to kick. As soon as I sensed the writhing Blood Cloud, I abandoned my attack and extracted my body.

-Crash!

Where I stood a moment ago, a bloody slash poured down. The Blood Cloud extending from the claws stretched out, transforming into a slashing attack that swept across space.

A new attack, not shown before. Was it kept hidden? A beast playing mind games?

The plan remained unchanged. Avoid close combat. Block the creature from a distance.

I took the hit. I created a distance and fired various spells. Magic bullets, magic slashes, offensive spells with elemental changes, and binding spells to immobilize.

All sorts of magic traced patterns in the space.

Naturally, Aerulus tried to break through them to close the distance. The monster charged, backed by overwhelming physical abilities.

I dodged and deflected everything. I accepted the unavoidable damage and deflected everything else as best as I could.

As long as I had spatial perception, it was doable.

As long as Qi wasn't destroyed in one hit, it was doable.

I couldn't shake it off with physical ability alone, but if I stiffened it with magic, it was possible.

Magic rapidly drained away. I forcibly drew in magic from the surroundings. The unrefined magic superheated my circuits.

I would suffer from aftereffects, but it's better than dying.

I stalled for time. Rescue from outside. I didn't know when it would come. Even if it did arrive, I didn't know how long it would take to break through the outer wall, but I had to trust it was the only way.

-Grrr…

A short while later, Aerulus's roaring mouth shut. The repeated flailing of its forelegs ceased.

'What's going on?'

Gasping for breath with a distance between us, I regulated my breathing, which was close to collapse, and observed Aerulus's demeanour.

For some reason, it had stopped. Its eyes, still watching me, seemed to be contemplating something.

It was a brief respite, regardless. I managed to soothe my overworked body, circuits, and core for a moment.

The sweet respite didn't last long. Aerulus, having finished deliberating, showed signs of movement.

-Thump!

Aerulus struck the ground. An invariably destructive leap followed. I hurled my body backward, forming spells in the process.

I blocked the approach. As before, I countered with magic while maintaining a distance.

The red mist approached… but it didn't. My body tensed momentarily.

Aerulus was not heading towards me.

The direction had changed.

Towards… the firmly closed entrance of the shelter.

Effectively, a place teeming with easy prey for Aerulus.

'Oh damn it.'

I knew Aerulus's goal. It was clear from the blatant desire in its eyes.

I felt the blatant murderous intent.

The moment I saw those blood-soaked, bright red eyes, I couldn't help but feel it.

Murderous intent is usually associated with filthy and nasty emotions.

The desire to kill usually stems from ugly emotions.

The true killing intent I had felt from the back-alley thugs was nothing but dirty, vile, and lowly emotions.

But Aerulus was different.

I realized it the moment our eyes met.

It wasn't right to add to the murderous intent, but it was a pure emotion.

Aerulus's murderous intent contained no sordid grudge.

Hunger.

The foundation of the murderous intent was nothing but hunger.

To eat is to survive.

One survives by preying upon others.

To hunt, to not be hunted, one becomes stronger.

And thus, one hunts.

A clear and concise way of thinking. No sticky malice attached.

There's no complex reason for predators in the wild to eat herbivores. It's not something that should be condemned as wrong.

"……"

Aerulus was no different.

Why did it attack me initially? Because it saw prey with no reason to be spared.

Why is it now ignoring me and heading towards the shelter? Because I'm not prey that can be easily eaten, and the shelter is teeming with vulnerable targets.

How long can the shelter's door hold off Aerulus? I can break it, so why couldn't Aerulus?

For a moment, it seemed as if time had stopped.

Aerulus, which had rushed into the shelter, stopped. Even the falling stones from the sky paused with it.

It was like before.

When I had dragged my feet back, it was as if the world paused, waiting for my decision.

The world slowed down. Thoughts accelerated. Monsters swarming in and superhumans guarding the entrance were scattered by Aerulus.

There was no one to stop it. If Aerulus crawled through the entrance as it was, everyone inside would die.

I had to block it. That thought crossed my mind. My rationale calmly calculated. Can I block it? I asked again.

Could I survive if I did?

Not in an open space like this. Not where I can easily dodge and move out of the way. Not where I can easily fire off spells.

Even if the shelter's corridors are wide, they aren't as spacious as this place.

I would have to face the attacks that would otherwise turn me into mincemeat head-on, in rapid succession.

I couldn't blindly cast spells. My body, hardened by Qi and enveloped in Hardening, would have to endure it all.

That's just suicide. Throwing away my life for the sake of dragging out a few more moments.

Frankly, haven't I gathered enough excuses?

That thought had crossed my mind.

I hadn't rested a moment since the dungeon's rampage began.

I killed every monster in sight and saved people who hadn't managed to evacuate. I blocked monsters that targeted those people.

Everything was fraught with the risk of death. Even with all my strength, I was just a rookie who had never faced a real battle before.

For hours, I had run around like this, somehow managing to stall even a monster that could be considered an alpha.

I've met the bare minimum. I've filled the basic excuse. No, I've more than filled it.

If anyone heard my side, there wouldn't be many pointing fingers, calling me a selfish

bastard.

They would say I've done enough.

So, there really was no reason to stomp on the ground here.

Bang! The ground beneath me shattered. I extended my leg. The space changed rapidly.

A different speed than before. Whoosh! Blood spurted from my leg. The excessive strain cried out in a red scream.

I blocked the entrance to the shelter. Aerulus's eyes widened. Momentarily, I was faster than it.

Aerulus approached.

The thick foreleg, the vicious claws protruding from it, and the enveloping, charging Blood Cloud came forward.

Death loomed in my invisible field of vision.

CHAPTER 80
SAVIOR

The massive beast charged, pushing the air aside, shrouded in a sinister mist of malice.

A drool of blood stretched between its gaping jaws, and eyes filled with killing intent aimed right at me.

All of it made me regret my immediate choice.

I gritted my teeth.

Whoosh! The sky's wing feathers, hanging behind me, extended vertically. Soon they wrapped around my arms like thick gauntlets.

Into the wrapped sky's wing feathers, I pumped a generous amount of Qi, inside and out. I was scraping the bottom of my magical reserves. My recovery couldn't keep up with the consumption.

I hurled my fist.

Against the colossal forepaw, my hand seemed pitifully small and frail.

The Qi, intertwining with the surging Blood Cloud, flickered like a candle in the face of a storm.

Screech! A vicious claw from the foreleg slammed down onto my right arm. The Qi splintered. The sky's wing feathers tore, the skin split open, and blood gushed out.

Crash! The huge forepaw swung down like a hammer. I blocked it with the opposite hand. Crack! A chilling noise transmitted from my arm as bundles of muscle around the bone ripped apart.

My body, unable to dissipate the shock, was pushed back. It felt like my upper body would collapse. I planted my legs firmly on the ground.

Yet, my legs dragged on. They trembled as if about to give out, inching backward bit by bit.

-Crash!

An immense shock spread throughout my body. My consciousness momentarily blurred.

The scenery changed.

Before I knew it, the door had shattered.

Having smashed through it with my body, I now rolled down the extended corridor.

It hurt. Pain whitewashed my brain. The invisible sights alternated between black and white.

A sense of crisis flowed along my spine. I tumbled over as if throwing my body forward. Thud! The thick foreleg crashed into where I had just been.

The claw pierced through the Qi, grazing my side. Blood spilled onto the floor. My consciousness rapidly dimmed.

Nausea roiled in my stomach. My internal organs twisted, threatening to spill out through the wounds. I wrapped the sky's wing feathers around me to plug the holes.

Aerulus didn't consider my condition. The forepaw shrouded in Blood Cloud and the widely opened jaws kept lunging at me.

Spatial perception wobbled unstably.

The pain drifted away. The sense of living was fading.

In my unseen field of view, a comfortably beckoning death approached with a gesture.

The comfort wasn't alone. Compromise gestured next to it.

Escape now. It might be possible. At the very least, survival might be possible. Why am I doing this with people behind me? It's nothing. Just abandon it. Aren't I the

most important? Live now and save later. There is no need for this right now. Later, I can save more people…

-Crack-!

I bit down hard. Cracks raced across my teeth. Blood from my gums gushed out.

This pain was vividly transmitted. Spitting out the welling blood, I shook my hand.

Crash! A barrage of slashes erupted from my grip, sweeping over Aerulus. The control was poor. My left hand was also caught in the onslaught.

I tumbled to the ground. My left hand, stripped of skin, barely touched the ground. Pain surged in. I struggled to my feet, staggering.

I forcefully dragged my leg forward.

Death had abruptly approached.

It was wrong.

The one approaching was me.

I was exposing my neck to death.

This wasn't coercion. It wasn't an unavoidable circumstance. It wasn't an inescapable fate.

Wandering around in the rampaging dungeon was my choice. Killing the monsters was my choice, saving the people was my choice.

It was also my choice to block Aerulus outside, to crawl in here, to cling and fight with this monster.

'I am… '

A vicious claw flew at me. I twisted my body to dodge. Bloodied slashes from the claws scraped my shoulder. Blood inevitably splattered. Strength drained from my left arm.

The onslaught continued. My body became battered. The Qi gradually dissipated. I thrashed my limbs in desperation, wringing out the circuits to manifest magic that included me in its range.

My body was increasingly pushed back. Against my will, my body bent more and more.

Right then, I wanted to run. I didn't want to die, didn't want to feel this pain, didn't want to struggle with such a beast.

'I am such a wretched human.'

In the dimly lit view, the past overlapped.

My life had barely spanned two decades. I hadn't roamed the wide world freely.

But I had seen many people. Even if not face-to-face, the sea of knowledge was filled with various human spectacles.

There were many living in the present. Among them, many were happier than me.

A comfortable nest that was neither cold nor hot. Parents who loved their children. Circumstances that didn't warrant great concerns about the future.

Envy tore at my guts. I couldn't aim for such a life, didn't have a wholesome disposition to strive for it.

Looking up made my stomach hurt. I had no confidence to climb up there. It seemed impossible to achieve that kind of happiness.

So, I deliberately looked down. I focused on the depth I could descend to at any moment.

There were many happier than me. So, I searched for those who were unhappier.

There were many happy people, but there were twice as many unhappy ones.

I was always beaten like a dog by my parents. And in this world, so many parents did the same.

Parents had torn at my belly.

Regardless, I lived. There were those who became butchered meat at their parents' hands and some left in snowbanks to become ice.

I had never had a proper meal at my parents' home. I was always starving. I remember consuming more cigarette ashes and alcohol than food.

I didn't starve to death. In many places, it wasn't about starving but rather dying of starvation.

I wasn't loved by my parents. There were too many parents in this world who didn't love their children.

Even in the present, that was the case. It was the same in the 21st century. Even the information recorded about them said so.

The 20th century. What about the even more difficult times before? The 19th century, the 18th century, the 17th century…

I considered all the eras of human existence, the cases of those unjustly buried without record.

Dare I count them? How many miseries were there? As many as there were happy—if not, incomparably more.

I took solace in that.

There were too many unhappier than me. I was not part of the relatively unhappy group. My circumstances were decent.

To whine about being unhappy with such trivial matters would be pathetic. Those truly unhappy were buried in the cold ground before they could even whine.

I was average.

So, don't make a fuss.

I kept repeating this to myself. Even in my thoughts, it was a despicable and ugly notion.

Looking at happiness, I had no confidence to ascend, yet at the bottom, I masturbated to unhappiness.

I hated that part of me.

-“Aren’t you just like that vermin?”

Whenever that happened, my parents’ words filled my mind. Their voices made me nauseous just to recall, but I couldn’t help but remember.

-“You do nothing but consume. Even pigs leave behind meat when they die, but what about you? Huh?”

My parents didn’t love me. I longed for affection, but they didn’t give it.

Parents should naturally embrace their offspring, but mine didn’t.

For some reason, the language I understood without learning was always filled with curses. Negative emotions like disgust, contempt, jealousy, and envy overflowed.

They were wrong. Assuming the moral and social knowledge I learned is correct, they were wrong on both fronts: as parents and as humans.

-“You shouldn’t have been born.”

-“Why were you born, I didn’t want to give birth to something like this.”

-“Disgusting child.”

Dirty and revolting. Vile and selfish. An individual who shouldn’t have been born.

My parents were wrong. That’s what I believed. Therefore, everything they said had to be wrong.

When I mulled over my own ugliness, I couldn’t always deny it.

I felt like trash, matching what my parents said, taking comfort in others’ misfortune.

It had been years since my parents died, yet I still couldn’t escape their shadow, and I seemed too wretched.

I had to deny it.

I couldn't even lie that I was a good person.

I rarely did minor good deeds in life.

I never took initiative. I never went out of my way to find and help others with their inconveniences.

Because it was out of my sight. Because I couldn't see it. Because seeking it out to help, if not certain, was far too troublesome and annoying.

Also, because I couldn't do it. Because I couldn't save people dying on the other side of the globe. Because I couldn't solve all the hunger and pain in the world. Because my ability was too poor to help others.

There were times when I couldn't make such excuses.

Issues inside my field of vision. Matters I could definitely help with.

Beyond that, right now, at this moment, there was something only I could do.

It was the same then. I didn't remember exactly, but it was an ordinary day.

There was a car running unstably, and someone who couldn't get out of the way in time. There was no one but me nearby.

I was the only one who could help, and I had more than enough capacity to do so.

So, I threw myself at it. I pushed the person out of the way, and I was the one hit. My leg became useless.

'I… '

It's the same now.

With spatial perception, I could feel everyone in need of help.

Among the superhumans caught in the rampage, I was the strongest.

Right now, I was the only one who could block Aerulus.

'I have to deny it.'

I shouldn't become the bastard my parents talked about. I shouldn't become the trash they talked about. I had to deny them.

But here, in this place where no one else can help, if I turn my back and flee…

I will never be able to deny it for the rest of my life. I won't be able to make excuses to myself.

If someone asks me if I was unfairly treated by my parents, I won't be able to answer without a moment's hesitation.

'That can't happen.'

Crack! The tooth barely holding on cracked as if it would break at any moment.

I launched my fist.

Thud! A rough resonance transmitted. Aerulus's form was slightly pushed back. The eyes of the monster bearing down on me widened.

Aerulus recoiled. Perhaps it considered the dying prey's final resistance worth observing.

My hand trembled. I forcibly fit the awkwardly bent fingers back into place and clenched my fist.

My left arm lacked strength. I grabbed the protruding bone and twisted it back into place.

I don't want to die. I don't like getting hurt, and I don't like pain.

But I don't want to live with regret after running away here. I don't want to live without being able to make excuses.

That's the kind of human I am. Even before the kindness of helping others, I couldn't back down for my own sake.

‘I’ll block it.’

As far as I can, because only I can… I have to.

I will block this monster. I’ll do the best I can.

If I survive later, I should be able to proudly say that I did my best at the time.

The thoughts of a being called ‘me.’

One of the elements that make up and support me.

A belief that distinguishes me from others.

A uniqueness that sets me apart from other entities.

Perhaps it’s because I’m facing death.

While feeling the sensation of disappearing, paradoxically, the entity known as ‘me’ became vividly clear.

-Thud!

At that moment, something resounded greatly within me.

-Thud!

The rough waves shook my mind.

-Thud!

The waves continued.

The dying heart throbbed loudly.

With each beat, my uniqueness became conscious.

‘Ah.’

It was only in the face of imminent death that I became aware.

A bitter laugh escaped me.

Magic Affinity and Jack-of-all-Trades.

They weren't given to me. No one had given them to me. I had merely realized what 'I' inherently possessed.

Spatial perception… that was indeed given. And there were two, not just one.

Above all, I don't know why I have these things.

Questions abounded, but for now, life was more pressing, so I shelved them.

Slowly, time that had been dragging was returning to normal.

-Creak- A sound of something breaking echoed in the corridor. Not from teeth, not from bones breaking, but from something else.

Aerulus, who had been watching me, flinched and lifted its head.

Its gaze turned upward.

There was no sky to be seen.

It was blocked by the ceiling, after all.

A sneer broke out. The sneer was directed at me.

'This isn't a game; it's reality.'

Don't treat the world like a game. It's reality, so think properly.

That ceiling was obstructing my realization of my uniqueness.

Because it's not a game. A world without magic or supernatural powers, that was the common sense I knew.

As much as I'm in this world now, I'm a human from the original world.

The narrow-minded thought that I couldn't possibly have a unique ability in the

original world, a belief that I had blindly assumed and devoutly believed in.

Crash!

A section of the already cracked ceiling collapsed. Debris from the ceiling showered down on Aerulus.

Also.

Spatial perception fell apart.

Spatial perception? That was wrong. It was just my hasty attempt to bundle together two tremendous things at my own level.

As the thing I called spatial perception collapsed, ‘information’ disappeared. The updating of the map stopped. Sensation remained, but the map was a poor substitute for just a moment ago.

It didn’t matter.

I knew how to restore this map.

-Ding!

Through my clouded mind, I could hear the sound of an alarm.

What could it be? It’s strange.

My smartwatch had disconnected long ago.

-Ding!

[The player is becoming aware of their uniqueness.]

[Your unique ability ‘Magic Affinity’ grows.]

[Your unique ability ‘Jack-of-all-Trades’ grows.]

[Reading the player’s emotions.]

[Player correction system: Measuring.]

…

▸Mental State:

‘On the Cusp of Death’: Standing in the face of death.

‘Savior’: Saving those in danger.

‘Goodness’: An intention belonging to goodness.

‘Sacrifice’: Giving up one’s own for others or for a purpose.

…

[Partially fulfilling the conditions.]

[The Savior correction system temporarily activates.]

[Assisting the savior.]

…

CHAPTER 81
SPARKLE

Something changed.

It wasn't just that spatial perception had crumbled.

My body changed. Strength returned to legs that seemed ready to collapse. It felt as though something was supporting and caressing my back…

'What is this?'

Could it be a flashback before death? Am I really on the brink of dying?

– Grrrrr…!

…There was no time to think.

A nearly dead man had just gained a little leeway.

Aerulus's growl always carried the purpose of intimidation. It was the sound a predator made to threaten and paralyze its prey.

But this time, there was a mix of confusion and wariness. Maybe it sensed my changes instinctively.

I could feel it.

The fur brushing the wind, distinguished by green lines.

'Huh.'

A world painted black with green lines.

It was familiar information. This was the frustrating perspective I used to feel in the early days of my life here.

Back then, I thought my spatial perception was broken.

Now, I understood.

I was merely reading the entire space. My rank, my level, was too low to read it properly, making it almost useless.

And since I saw the gate this way, it felt incredibly eerie.

I nodded. A subtle sense brushed past me.

I could feel things I couldn't feel before.

This space itself was advantageous to Aerulus. It had transformed into such an environment. A dungeon's backup. It's the benefit given to an alpha entity by the dungeon.

It also exerted pressure on external entities.

It invigorated the monsters within and suppressed the outsiders.

Previously, just resisting the pressure with spatial perception was overwhelming.

Now? There was no reason to leave it as it was.

I waved my hand.

The air fluctuated along my gesture. The minute reverberation soon turned into a massive wave.

'Manifesting authority.'

[Space]

The space shook violently.

The vortex of space rising around me spread outwards. It tore apart the dungeon's control in an instant, and my dominion took over the surroundings.

–…!?

Aerulus's eyes widened. Obvious bewilderment was transmitted.

The power that had been empowering it was now gone.

Aerulus lifted its head to look at the sky. The sense of the dungeon that always watched and supported it was now absent.

Until just a moment ago, this place was the dungeon's domain. It was a space devoured by a rampaging dungeon, and a battlefield advantageous to the monsters belonging to the dungeon.

But not anymore.

Now this space was under my control. Not at the level of clumsy spatial perception. Although it wasn't full manifestation of authority, it was at least beyond what a fourth-ranked dungeon could contend with.

I could feel it. The green lines against the black background…

Even while on the brink of death, the vibrations reached my skin. My hearing finely caught its growl.

Though it didn't hinder combat, there was no reason to stick to a less optimal method while better ones were available.

I waved my hand again. This time, there were no fluctuations or vortices in space.

'Manifesting authority.'

[Observation]

Unlike the authority of space, nothing special happened.

I just began to receive information again.

There might be other ways to operate it, but I had no time to research and experiment with the operation methods.

Thus, I used the most familiar way.

Like spatial perception, I gathered information from the area centered around me.

Contrary to the space's waves that radiated from me, waves of information converged on me.

The black map regained its color. Blood-red fur and mist, crimson puddles of blood scattered on the ground, and the sky's wing feathers fluttering with magical energy.

Clear.

The information flooding my mind was incomparably clearer and more detailed than before.

Bang! The ground split. A blood-red surge swept in. The foreleg wrapped in blood mist slashed through the air. The wind slicing from its claws approached menacingly.

The same attack as before.

But it felt different than before.

I stretched out my hand. Blue Qi covered it.

Attack and defense.

Qi and blood mist intertwined. The blue and red pushed against each other.

The blue was pushed back.

It was better than before, but it still yielded.

The reason was clear. The blood mist was denser and stronger than my Qi.

If met head-on, the Qi would shatter.

– Grrrr…!

My body wasn't pushed back. I gently diverted the descending attack's trajectory. The attack shattered the innocent ground.

I dodged the foreleg that swung like a whip. The long-tattered wall was torn away.

‘Jack-of-all-Trades.’

A versatile unique ability that holds at least minimal potential in various fields.

Also, a skill-related unique ability that enhances finesse.

It was rapidly growing as I became aware of my uniqueness.

I could dodge and deflect more easily than before. My finesse had improved.

Additionally, the quality of the information collected by the authority of observation increased. There was no reason I couldn’t avoid it.

If I had been at this level from the start, I could have held out.

But my condition was at its worst to drag out the time.

Had it not been for the unknown force supporting my back, I would have been a corpse already.

Also, my instinct told me that this help wouldn’t last much longer.

I couldn’t waste time. I had to finish it quickly. If I fell here, the people in the shelter would die.

That was true even a moment ago. But just because I couldn’t do it due to power issues.

Now? Could it be possible? I had to try.

I smirked and reached out. My arm, broken and battered, held together by the sky’s wing feathers.

And my right arm, still bearing the scars of a gruesome burn.

Aerulus flinched as it extended its foreleg. I sensed its intention to pull back. Is it because it’s a beast that its instinct is sharp?

Whoosh!

But it was too late. The distance was sufficient.

Sparks flew on my right arm. In an instant, they blossomed into a massive flame.

Flames that set oneself and the world on fire, flames that leave no ashes of what they hate.

Gop-hwa (Catastrophic Fire).

Why do flames rise from my arm? I still don't know precisely, but I understood how it worked.

'Magic Affinity.'

A unique ability I originally had but didn't realize.

The original description of an extraordinary affinity for magic. It wasn't wrong.

But the ability I defined at this moment was different.

Thanks to Magic Affinity, I felt magic from the beginning. It was easy to start with magic. Handling it was easy, and using magic to strengthen the body, Qi, and spells was easy.

Magic Affinity isn't just that kind of ability. While it might include that, it's merely a byproduct.

It's not a clumsy ability that just makes difficult things easy.

It's an ability to do what others can't.

When was it? Was it that fire?

I encountered Gop-hwa. The flames that engulfed my right arm and body were Gop-hwa. They burned me, but for some reason, I survived.

Especially the right arm, which was tenaciously gnawed at by Gop-hwa, understood and remembered it.

'Expansion Ability.'

Expansion of uniqueness.

A step forward, not standing still.

Whether it's regression or progression, it's about changing without stopping.

'Homogenization, Gop-hwa.'

A storm of flames swept through the wide corridor. A wave of fire that swept away the thick blood surged forward.

– Kaaaargh—!

For the first time, a scream of agony erupted from Aerulus's throat. The corridor shook. Debris rolled across the floor.

The flames adhered to the blood mist enveloping its body, clinging to its blood-red fur.

Aerulus rolled on the ground. But Gop-hwa didn't extinguish.

'It hurts like hell, doesn't it? You bastard.'

I went through it, and it hurt like hell.

It felt incredibly satisfying. No matter what, seeing the creature that tormented and tried to kill me in such pain was cathartic.

But I was also dying. Smiling bitterly, I kicked off the ground.

– Grrrrrr—!

Aerulus, foaming at the mouth, struck the ground with its forepaw and stood up.

Even with its eyes rolled back in pain, survival instincts made its body move.

Its gaze focused on my right arm. It seemed wary of the remaining embers of Gop-hwa.

The sound of wind splitting.

The claws, partially wrapped in blood mist, flew toward my face.

There was a difference in size. Even if I extended my hand, the length was different, and my head would go first.

There was a difference in body levels. If we ran side by side, I could never outrun Aerulus.

It wasn't that I couldn't dodge. I twisted my body. My ear, now unrecognizable, flew off. The tips of my hair were severed.

Instead, I regained distance. I dug into its embrace.

Even then, Aerulus's attention remained on my right arm. It seemed desperate to avoid Gop-hwa.

I stretched out my left arm.

Encased in the sky's wing feathers but with Qi dissipated, it was an unguarded left arm. An arm receiving less scrutiny.

An arm difficult for a beast tormented by Gop-hwa to focus on.

– Keh!

The gaping jaws encroached. The distance closed. It meant Aerulus had an opportunity to attack.

If bitten, my upper body would easily fit into its jaws. The sharp and thick teeth could chew up my body in an instant.

I thrust my left arm into it.

The open jaws closed. Teeth flew toward me.

– Crunch-

The sky's wing feathers were torn apart. They dug into the flesh. Slicing through muscles, finally embedding into the bone.

– Crackle!

At that moment, I triggered magic.

‘Expansion Ability.’

The circuit creaked. I scraped up magic from the bottom. It wasn’t enough.

– Woooong!

I drew in surrounding magic. Magic mixed with miscellaneous elements. I ignored the aftereffects and slammed it all into my left arm.

‘Homogenization.’

I had experienced Gop-hwa. I had endured the pain and understood it.

This time, there was no such experience.

But I certainly felt it. I felt it acting on me and saw others using it up close.

It was also a unique ability with an intense impression that didn’t lag behind Gop-hwa.

‘Changhae (Vast Ocean).’

Crack! An explosion of cold burst from my left arm, torn by sharp teeth. Aerulus’s head froze entirely.

Its jaws held my left arm. There was a difference in size. It meant its head was lowered.

It was in a perfect position for a strike and couldn’t escape.

Realizing this, Aerulus hurriedly tried to pull back its head.

Crack! The long-shattered arm bones ground against each other. The pain felt like boiling blood due to being flash-frozen alive.

Slam…! I pulled back my clenched fist with unprecedented force.

There was no next. I had to finish it in one blow.

'Gop-hwa?'

If used, it could inflict a fatal wound or even maim. But it was uncertain. The barely manifested Gop-hwa might not kill it.

The creature I hit directly with Gop-hwa was now active.

I knew Gop-hwa was powerful. I felt the might of Gop-hwa manifested by Hong Yeon-hwa.

But.

'Something stronger.'

There are too many strong people in this world. And many monsters beyond common sense.

One monster can steep the vast lands of China in poison and leave them abandoned.

One rampaging monster can shatter an entire continent.

There are many powerful monsters in the towers that might invade someday. There are real monsters sitting at the top of those towers.

All this is knowledge from the original work. I haven't felt it in reality.

The strongest power I felt while living in this world. The strongest person I met.

Ferocious and wild golden magic.

'Expansion Ability.'

I contained it. A sample? Material? Information? There was more than enough. I collected information almost daily.

The person I contacted most. The person who kept guiding and teaching me.

The person I imagined as a calm adult.

I could replicate it.

'Homogenization.'

Did I overuse it? My head felt light. I held onto my fraying sanity as if it would snap any moment.

This was the last. I instinctively realized.

Slam! My nails dug into my palm. The Qi flared wildly, then compressed and settled.

The color changed. In the collapsing corridor, a sudden sunlight appeared.

Atra Clyde's unique ability.

An acquired unique ability boasting power comparable to Gop-hwa and the property of magic.

'Midday Sun.'

A golden-tinged fist struck Aerulus's head.

Light exploded.

– Crash!

– Crack- The space's outer wall, which seemed on the verge of collapse, was struck by a fist.

Golden energy followed. Crash! A shockwave spread through the world.

– Crack!

How many times did I strike with my fist? Five? Six? The outer wall's cracks finally crumbled away.

I couldn't destroy it completely. I didn't intend to.

The collapsing gray wall before my eyes. Atra quickly withdrew her fist and leapt into the hole.

‘Where is it? Where are you?’

Her bloodshot eyes scanned the area. Vision enhanced by magic scoured the city.

The ruined city came into view. Buildings collapsed, and fires flared up here and there.

It was a scene that heightened her unease.

She gritted her teeth and crossed through.

She saw bodies with no possibility of survival. She saw hunks of meat being devoured by monsters.

Her unease grew. She scattered the damn monsters with bursts of Qi.

“……!”

A familiar aura. Faint and it doubled her unease.

Bang! The rooftop she stood on sank. Atra’s gaze scoured the origin of the aura.

Next to that aura, there was the menacing aura of a monster.

Then.

– Crash!

A roar echoed in her ears. It was a familiar trait and sound of magic.

‘Damn.’

Damn, damn, damn…!

Unease.

The world changed rapidly. Atra’s form extended.

Bang! The ground shattered upon landing. She didn’t care and swiftly scanned ahead.

The entrance to the destroyed shelter. The door near the corridor was smashed and scattered on the floor.

Unease.

'It can't be.'

This time is different. It can't be. Surely, they're safe. I can feel the magic. It's different from last time. This time.

This time…

The thoughts filled her mind. She tore through her unease and rushed into the shelter.

Then.

She saw an arm.

'……'

An arm with all the fingers broken and the pinky finger missing.

An arm that seemed shredded by something massive, with no intact skin left.

An arm clad in chunks of ice.

An arm that should be attached to a body but was somehow separated.

An arm that felt familiar.

The world turned black. Why? Her gaze naturally turned away.

Nearby.

A monster corpse with a shattered head lay over a pool of blood. A large monster with red fur. It seemed to be an alpha entity.

It was dead. Who killed it?

She didn't want to see. But she had to. Her gaze naturally returned.

Next to it… She saw a corpse with one arm missing.

A corpse.

A sight that couldn't belong to a living person.

A familiar physique. The familiar scar on the mangled right arm that should be called a chunk of meat.

Lying in a pool of blood…

"Ah."

Her lips parted. No sound came.

The light disappeared from Atra's eyes.

[The Savior Correction System]

[Assisting in the savior's life maintenance.]

[The 'Curse of the Beautiful and Short-lived' activates.]

[Exhausted vitality restores the body.]

[The 'Curse of the Beautiful and Short-lived' consumes vitality.]

CHAPTER 82
NOT MY ARM

– Tat tat tat tat

I heard the mechanical sound of typing. Fingers tapping on the keyboard.

I could see ahead. The light of the monitor illuminated the relatively dark room.

It felt strange. It was like recalling a memory from the past.

I tilted my head. Why did this happen all of a sudden?

Despite the questions, my fingers moved nimbly, pounding the keyboard.

▸Me: Flower

▸Me: Flower

▸Me: Flower?

▸Me: Ebe bebeb

▸Me: Knock knock…

A barrage of chat messages in an instant. Normally, it takes some time to get a reply in a chat.

If the timing is off, replies can come back hours later.

▸Agapanthus: What?

The reply came back immediately.

Flower.

Knowing that Agapanthus's nickname was a type of flower, I sometimes called them Flower.

At first, they were baffled by the nickname, but now they had adapted and responded without much reaction.

The fingers that were tapping the keyboard paused for a moment.

I recalled my memories.

I called out because I was bored, but I didn't have much to say. After fidgeting for a moment, I brought up the usual topic.

▸Me: Play [Savior] right now! (Play now)

▸Me: Flower, play with me

▸Me: It's really fun

▸Me: Not lying

▸Me: (Puppy looking up with expectant eyes emoticon)

Savior.

Thinking back, it was a game that made my teeth grind, but back then, I couldn't deny how much fun I had.

The immediate reply stopped. Considering that Agapanthus was faster at replying than I, who was stuck at home 24/7, it was strange.

Whenever I asked Agapanthus to play Savior, their replies would slow down.

▸Agapanthus: No

The reply was disappointing. I twitched my fingers and started typing again.

▸Me: Eeeee

▸Me: It’s really fun

▸Agapanthus: It wasn’t fun

▸Me: Gasp

▸Me: (Puppy falling into a puddle emoticon)

A sigh escaped my lips at the shocking reply. I could list more than three fun aspects of Savior right then and there.

But back then, I possessed a self that could respect individual preferences. I swallowed the sigh spilling out.

▸Agapanthus: Is it fun? Is it worth playing?

▸Me: Yes, it’s fun. I’m already on my 7th playthrough

▸Agapanthus:… Only the 7th? Why so slow?

▸Me: It’s because Flower doesn’t know Savior. When you dig into each aspect, it takes time. And it’s not that slow anyway

I stared at the monitor with a sulky face.

Even though Agapanthus responded with “not fun” whenever I recommended Savior, they often—no, frequently asked about it.

There were no specific questions about the game.

Just, “Is it worth playing?”, “Is it fun?”, “So, how did it go?”, “Which character did you get close to?”, etc…

They didn’t play the game but often asked how I played it.

▸Me: The 7th playthrough was ruined because I left Shio-ram

▸Agapanthus: What?

7th playthrough.

A playthrough so failed that I only referred to it as the ‘Vagrant’ route for my own sake of distinguishing it.

The 7th playthrough was disastrously worse than the 1st, to be precise.

Unlike previous runs, I abandoned the blessings of growth and other benefits and left Shio-ram.

After the 6th playthrough ended, I hadn’t found a solution, so I wandered outside the Shio-ram map early in the playthrough, searching for hidden elements.

It was a short-sighted decision.

After leaving Shio-ram and roaming around the Korean map, I realized it too late while watching the popup triggered by my unique ability [Crisis Detection].

▸Agapanthus: Why did you leave?

▸Agapanthus: Are you an idiot?

▸Agapanthus: Why would you leave a place that provides everything you need to grow and protects you?

As I explained that, a harsh response came from Agapanthus, who had been listening quietly.

Seeing the replies coming in twice as fast as usual, I felt a surge of frustration.

▸Me: What do you know, Flower

▸Me: You’ve never played it properly

▸Agapanthus: I don’t need to play it to know. It’s stupid to leave.

▸Agapanthus: Ugh, idiot

▸Me: Pfft

▸Me: I won’t talk to someone who doesn’t understand properly

I stared at the monitor with a sulky face.

A stupid choice. I know that too. If I had just progressed in Shio-ram, I would have been stronger than in previous playthroughs.

But it wasn’t enough.

The mechanical sound of typing ceased. Fingers fidgeted in thought.

In [Savior], there are no set final bosses or ending conditions.

I just decided on my own that I would take them down.

In the game, there are five towers that support the world.

The Tower of Space.

The Tower of Harmony.

The Tower of Observation.

The Tower of Knowledge.

The Tower of Growth.

The Tower of Space physically connects the world through gates, the Tower of Harmony breaks down language barriers and restores communication through smartwatches and the internet.

The Tower of Observation detects threats from monsters, villains, and traitors appearing worldwide, while the Tower of Knowledge preserves essential knowledge and records humanity must not lose.

The Tower of Growth quickly nurtures and produces key heroes to fend off various threats.

From any perspective, these towers aid humanity. They play a significant role in maintaining the world.

There are also opposing forces.

'……'

The Tower of Necromancy.

The Tower of Eternal Winter.

The Tower of Purgatory.

Elements that I arbitrarily decided as the final bosses and ending conditions, and strove to conquer.

After graduating from Shio-ram.

These three towers unleash powerful monsters like mad. They gradually dominate the surroundings, tightening humanity's fate.

The exact conditions for their activation are unknown.

In the 1st playthrough, all three awakened, and in subsequent playthroughs, sometimes only one or two did.

In the 1st playthrough, I eventually died to the master of the Tower of Necromancy.

As the name implies, "Necromancy" specializes in utilizing the dead in large-scale armies.

Despite that, their personal combat ability was monstrous, and I died without resistance.

In the 2nd and 3rd playthroughs, I died fumbling before even meeting the tower masters.

In the 4th playthrough, I died again to the master of the Tower of Necromancy.

4th playthrough [Undying].

Using the unique ability [Assimilation], I implemented various monster characteristics and regeneration, allowing me to withstand the Tower of

Necromancy's army to some extent.

I only lasted. I was crushed and beaten to a pulp by the army.

In the 5th playthrough, I aimed to come up with a power to sweep the army in one go and died like in the 3rd playthrough.

In the 6th playthrough, I sought to create an army like the master of the Tower of Necromancy, practicing necromancy, black magic, and spatial magic.

Using dark attribute magic, I mimicked immortality and created something akin to a shadow army. While it constantly lost to the necromantic army, it at least constituted a fight.

By that point, I was cut down by the master of the Tower of Purgatory, specialized in one-on-one combat.

'Urgh.'

Even thinking about it now made my hands tremble.

Honestly, even if I hadn't been cut down by the master of the Tower of Purgatory, I would have died without a sound to the master of the Tower of Necromancy.

Frustrating.

I felt utterly lacking. This kind of growth wouldn't even scratch the tower masters.

I needed to change my growth method. I needed a significant change, something to elevate my character's specs.

So, in the 7th playthrough, I went searching for such hidden pieces early on. I couldn't grow at all while being chased the entire playthrough.

But I seemed to have found something.

I couldn't be sure before utilizing it properly, but I felt that if I used it correctly, it could bring significant growth.

Thinking that, I glanced at the monitor.

I saw messages from Agapanthus, repeatedly questioning why I would leave such an optimal growth place like Shio-ram.

▸Me: Pfft

▸Me: Honestly, if our tower masters had fought with us, we would have won ages ago, seriously

▸Agapanthus:……

▸Me: Our team always goes AFK, seriously

▸Me: What are our tower masters doing

▸Me: If it was a 5 vs 3 fight, we would have won

For some reason, I poured out complaints to the silent Agapanthus.

Afterward, we chatted casually.

We talked about things other than Savior.

Did you eat well, don't eat like that, did you use the product I recommended, if you can't sleep, try this, and so on…

Time flew by. I dragged my chair. I didn't want to get up because my legs hurt.

I saw the sky.

The night sky beyond the window filled my gaze.

Gray clouds floating, shining starlight… and the full moon hanging in the center of the sky.

It was a sight that suddenly evoked early morning sentiments. After watching it for a while, I dragged the chair back to the desk.

▸Me: I'm going to sleep now

▸Agapanthus: Yeah, it's time to sleep

▸Agapanthus: Good night. Have sweet dreams

▸Agapanthus: If you get scared by nightmares, don't forget to use the product I recommended

▸Me: I'm using it well

▸Me: Thank you so much

▸Me: (Puppy bowing its head emoticon)

▸Me: Flower, have sweet dreams too

The conversation ended like that.

Tick tock – time passed.

I blinked absentmindedly.

A sudden feeling of loneliness hit me.

A strange thought.

The room was quiet both then and now.

Only the sound of typing and the chair dragging echoed.

But now, I felt lonely.

My hands wandered absentmindedly. My fingertips moved towards the pill bottle, then back to the keyboard.

The doctor said taking too many pills isn't good. It's better not to take them if possible.

My head felt dizzy. My vision blurred and then cleared.

I shook my head. I needed a topic to distract myself.

I thought about sleeping, then moved the mouse.

– Click

After a moment of startup noise, a brightly colored game appeared on the monitor.

[Savior]

There was no game like this for focusing.

I thought I'd play just for a moment, just to think about the 8th playthrough concept, and moved the mouse.

That night, the basic concept of the 8th playthrough was completed.

The 8th playthrough, which started the next day, easily surpassed the peaks of previous playthroughs.

It was an enormous growth achieved by the method I found in the 7th playthrough.

The 8th playthrough, having grown so, later engaged in combat with the master of the Tower of Eternal Winter.

I was stabbed in the back and killed by Baek Ahrin.

…

…

Consciousness surfaced.

My mind felt foggy. It was a dull sensation as if shrouded in mist.

I reflexively tried to blink. 'Instinct' rejected it. The feeling was that there's no point in trying to open them if you can't see anyway.

Instead, I wriggled my fingers.

I couldn't wriggle them.

My fingers were bound by something and couldn't move.

…I felt a sense of incongruity.

I couldn't wriggle them. My right arm was like that. Something felt off. My left arm couldn't move either. It should have been that way.

I couldn't feel anything. I felt like there was no place to receive the command 'wriggle your fingers.'

It felt strange.

At the same time, it felt like something I had experienced before.

'Oh… '

As I mumbled blankly, a memory flashed through my foggy mind.

The monster, Aerulus. The monster with eerie colored fur that tried to kill me, shrouded in red mist.

I couldn't stop its movement, so I extended my left hand.

In an instant, it bit down, ripping through skin, muscle, and grinding bone.

The binding Changhae shattered, and together it tore apart… tore apart…

My left arm.

'Ah.'

My left arm… I wriggled my shoulder. A void feeling of the severed end transmitted through my powerless body.

It was a terrible sensation.

A feeling I experienced when my left leg was crushed…

"Ah-"

A single cry of lament.

“…Ah—!…!…!?”

Followed by a tearing pain in my throat that made my body jolt violently.

– Beep beep beep!

A loud alarm rang right beside me.

I felt the presence of people rushing over in panic.

CHAPTER 83
RUINED IN REGRET?

At the moment Atra saw the lifeless body lying in the pool of blood…

Her vision turned black, and her mind darkened as well.

The past and present overlapped.

A disciple who said he would go outside.

Lee Hayul, who said he would go outside.

Trusting naively that he would do well, believing blindly in her disciple.

Turning a blind eye, thinking it was not her place to interfere, even while feeling uneasy.

A disciple caught in the dungeon's rampage.

Lee Hayul, caught in the dungeon's rampage.

A disciple who disappeared, leaving behind only one arm.

Lee Hayul, with his arm torn off and lying in a pool of blood.

"Ah."

A single lament escaped her lips.

Blood dripped from her tightly clenched fist.

Atra wanted to smash her own head.

She wanted to wrap Qi, drawn from her unique ability, around her fist and ram it into her skull.

It’s common to experience hallucinations from mental attacks. One method to cope is to commit suicide in the hallucination world.

She wanted to believe it was a mental attack causing hallucinations.

Her sharp senses and intuition told her this wasn’t a hallucination, but she clung to the slim possibility that it might be.

–…!

What stopped her was the faint, labored breathing of what she assumed to be a corpse.

Reality hit hard.

Atra, who had been standing like a stone statue, urgently knelt down.

Splash – The blood pool rippled as her knees hit the ground.

She checked Lee Hayul’s condition.

…It was hard to believe he was alive. Even with regenerative abilities, it would be difficult. But Lee Hayul was undoubtedly breathing.

Faintly, as if he might die at any moment, but he was alive.

He was alive.

That fact filled her mind.

With hurried yet careful hands, she picked up Lee Hayul. She took off her coat and wrapped it around him, then swiftly kicked off the ground.

The sky outside the shelter was regaining its original color.

The outer wall surrounding the city was gradually collapsing. Thanks to Lee Hayul, who took down the alpha entity that acted as the dungeon’s core.

She headed toward where she sensed people gathering near the collapsing outer wall.

There, the rescue team from the association was just about to destroy the dungeon's outer wall and enter.

Naturally, the rescue team included a hero with healing abilities.

The healing hero stayed behind while the rest of the combat team entered the city through the collapsed wall.

Healing began.

The hero conducting the healing, with a look of urgency, suddenly grimaced.

"This is beyond my ability."

"What?"

Beyond ability.

Atra's face cracked at the unexpected response.

"Sorry, I didn't hear you right. Could you say that again?"

"…Yes. This is beyond my ability."

Pasenov, the high-level hero with healing abilities, bit his lip. His face showed clear urgency and frustration.

"The wounds are too severe. The unique ability that caused the wounds is dreadfully hindering the healing."

This is beyond my ability.

Hearing the same words repeated, Atra's mind tangled.

Beyond ability. Then what should she do? The only healing method she had was the recovery potion she usually carried.

She had already used it. It had no effect.

Even with quality fit for use in the labyrinth, it didn't work.

A healing hero said it was beyond his ability. Then who should she go to?

She knew the answer. If one isn't enough, go to two; if a high-level hero isn't enough, go to the highest-level hero.

Neither option was available here.

Gritting her teeth, Atra picked up Lee Hayul again.

His body was cold. There was no warmth left. That feeling gradually extinguished her hope.

She kicked off the ground, wrapping both herself and Lee Hayul in Qi to avoid any potential harm.

She had to head to the association, where the gate was. From there, she needed to get him to a high-level healer.

– Huh, uh…

While relentlessly kicking off the ground…

Every faint breath she heard from him made her heart pound with fear.

Unstable. Lee Hayul in her arms seemed on the verge of death. He seemed like he could die any moment…

The smell of blood filled the air. The faintly sweet scent he used to carry was gone, replaced by the stinging odor of death.

All of it pained Atra. It felt like her heart was being torn apart.

'I shouldn't have let him go.'

The excuse that she couldn't keep him by her side forever was stupid.

Regret.

As always, it was too late.

[At 12:15 PM local time in Scotland's Shipnaha region, a chain dungeon rampage occurred.]

The first weekend of April.

The sudden news hit a peaceful world hard.

[The World Superhuman Association announced that this rampage in Shipnaha was a rare case without any precursors, involving the chain rampage of five fourth-level dungeons.]

A dungeon rampage.

No matter how peaceful the times, occasional disasters still claimed many lives.

[The casualties from this rampage are confirmed to be around 500 dead and 7,000 injured. These numbers are being updated and are expected to increase as investigations continue.]

The news spread quickly nationwide.

Dungeon rampages and the resulting human casualties are always major news and particularly eye-catching in daily life.

It's sensational news. That's all there is to it.

For those not directly affected, it ends with feelings of pity.

Atra was someone directly affected.

Near the entrance of the healing room.

She sat absent-mindedly, listening to the breaking news relayed through a hologram.

'……'

It had been almost a day since Lee Hayul entered the intensive care unit.

Despite receiving healing from dozens of professional healers during that time, Lee Hayul had yet to regain consciousness.

Such severe injuries.

The worst part was that the unique ability that caused the wounds was so insidious that even professional healers struggled to remove its remnants.

– Thud thud thud

Footsteps, not bothering to hide their presence, approached. Atra looked up.

A man in a uniform was crossing the corridor towards Atra. A familiar face.

Maxwell.

An extraordinary member of the association's disaster management department, responsible for handling the aftermath of dungeon incidents, and someone Atra knew a little.

"It's been a while, Clyde. Two years, huh?"

"…Yeah."

Her hair, which had become disheveled in a short time, and a voice devoid of strength.

A dark, lifeless complexion and eyes that had lost their light.

Maxwell sighed deeply inwardly. He expected it, but she was in bad shape.

Maxwell knew Atra's circumstances. He knew about the past tragedy of her disciple and her relationship with Lee Hayul.

He had an idea of what she might be feeling right now.

He hesitated briefly but still had to do his job.

"Supreme Hero Atra Clyde. Will you accompany us in reviewing the observation records from the accident scene as the guardian of Cadet Lee Hayul?"

The accident scene, observation records.

Atra's eyes wavered.

…

…

The interior was generally dim. Atra gritted her teeth, glaring at the hologram floating in the center of the room.

The hologram showed the scene just before the dungeon rampaged… specifically, Lee Hayul's appearance.

It was captured by a magical device endowed with the authority of the Tower of Observation.

It couldn't transmit while the space was isolated, but now that the isolation was lifted, it could be played back.

In the footage.

Strictly speaking, it wasn't Lee Hayul. The figure had a completely different build and appearance.

"At the time, Cadet Lee Hayul was confirmed to be carrying a cognitive interference magical device."

Atra nodded at Maxwell's explanation.

Bang! A loud noise erupted in the footage. Simultaneously, Lee Hayul staggered, grimacing and holding his head.

Atra guessed it was the ability 'spatial perception' that Lee Hayul had mentioned.

Did the dungeon rampage affect space, and did he get hurt through spatial perception?

The footage continued.

As the dungeon rampaged, the sky turned ashen.

In such a bewildering situation.

Lee Hayul first took care of a nearby child and headed to the shelter. Along the way, he used magic to kill monsters and reduce their numbers.

The footage continued.

After sending the child into the shelter, Lee Hayul himself did not enter.

Just a cadet, barely awakened for less than two months, he unhesitatingly dove into the heart of the rampaging dungeon, killing monsters and saving people.

A clawed attack from an enemy barely missed Lee Hayul. A fluttering cloth barely blocked the attack.

There were too many monsters. Too many people to save. Lee Hayul had no time.

He used magic to deal with monsters from a distance but occasionally had to take hits himself.

There were also moments when he had to shield civilians with his body.

He blocked all of it. With artifacts, Qi, and sometimes with his body when there wasn't time to use either, blood spilled.

'……'

The injuries were minor. There was no incident where he sustained the kind of injuries he had now.

The footage sped up. For hours, Lee Hayul didn't stop killing monsters and saving people.

The footage slowed down. In one corner of the footage, a familiar monster appeared.

The monster that lay beside Lee Hayul with a shattered head, the alpha entity maintaining the dungeon's rampage.

Boom! The monster in the footage kicked off the ground. It was quite fast. Too fast for the Lee Hayul Atra knew to react.

A massive foreleg pulled back. The foreleg quivered with concentrated power.

In the next moment, Atra gritted her teeth, predicting what would happen.

Bang! With a massive impact, Lee Hayul's body slammed into the road. Atra's fingertips trembled.

Lee Hayul, who had been tossed aside, twitched while scratching the asphalt.

His true form revealed as his cognitive interference magical device was dislodged by the previous strike.

'…… '

From Atra's perspective, Lee Hayul's face was clearly visible.

A face contorted in pain, trembling in fear.

She understood. It was a natural reaction for Lee Hayul, who hadn't experienced real combat.

His feet dragged back. He backpedaled. Naturally. He had to. He had to run.

Atra wished fervently that he would run away.

Then, his legs stopped.

It was a fleeting moment. A split second. Lee Hayul's face twisted.

Fear and pain.

With a face reflecting all that turmoil, Lee Hayul kicked off the ground.

Forward.

Toward the monster.

Wrapped in Qi, he stood against the monster.

Atra, staring blankly at the footage of Lee Hayul, recalled a conversation from a

certain day.

A question about how he would handle a dangerous situation.

At that time, Lee Hayul had scratched his head, nervously eyeing her and answering through a hologram.

– [I would probably run. I'm a coward who can't fight for my life.]

After answering, he had watched her reaction, worried she might be disappointed.

'Why… '

The image of Lee Hayul, gritting his teeth and confronting the alpha entity despite his body being a rag, overlapped.

Why didn't he run away?

The person who could answer that question was still unconscious.

Regret filled her.

Too late, far too late.

CHAPTER 84
BABY HAYUL (1)

In the hologram, Lee Hayul was desperate.

Whatever was so urgent, he clung to the alpha entity's steps throughout the entire battle, buying time.

Finally, the scene shifted to a corridor, continuing a fierce battle that naturally evoked a sense of desperation.

"…So? What's the point of showing me this?"

It was a hard scene for Atra to watch.

After shaking off some of her troubled thoughts, she turned her head.

"While it's true I'm his guardian, you don't usually go through the trouble of showing observation records."

"Haha, it's intimidating when Atra visits our office."

In other words, if they proceed carelessly and she shows up, it would be troublesome.

"That's not it. Why did you call me to view this? Is there really a need for my presence?"

Atra was, more or less, Lee Hayul's guardian.

It's natural to observe the scene of the dungeon rampage using a magical device imbued with the authority of the Tower of Observation.

It's also natural to collect records of Lee Hayul, who drastically reduced the damage in this rampage incident.

In the process, it's common sense to seek Lee Hayul's understanding.

Since he was unconscious, it made sense to seek permission from Atra, his guardian.

However, it was odd for them to request Atra's presence specifically, given how the association usually handled things.

Usually, they would either seek permission for viewing the observation records or inform her after the observation.

Atra nodded slightly, signaling him to get to the point quickly if he had something to say.

Her personality remained unchanged. Maxwell smiled wryly, fiddling with his tie, then operated the magical device.

The time in the footage sped up.

After a period of desperate struggle, the footage resumed at a certain point.

– Whoosh!

Seeing the flames filling the footage, Atra clicked her tongue.

The sense of danger that could be felt even through the screen. Flames that assured certain doom if touched.

Gop-hwa.

'Of course, he used it.'

It was a life-threatening situation. It was right to use all available means to survive, regardless of the aftermath.

But that didn't make the aftermath any easier.

Lee Hayul using Gop-hwa. Even the first-year professors who witnessed it at the time kept their mouths shut.

It was difficult to handle.

He used Gop-hwa. So what should we do? Should we question if he's an illegitimate child of the Gop-hwa family? Investigate if he's a collateral relative…

Neither was their business.

Seeing Hong Yeon-hwa, the successor of the Gop-hwa family, personally defending him, it seemed things wouldn't take a bad turn.

However, it wasn't something to broadcast to other organizations or the public.

Maxwell, confirming Atra's wrinkled expression, shook his head.

"This isn't the only matter."

"What?"

Maxwell operated the magical device again. The paused footage resumed. Atra watched the footage with a puzzled mind.

How long had she been staring at the screen with a mix of complex and bitter emotions?

– Crackle!

When the freezing began from Lee Hayul's left arm, covering the monster's face, Atra's expression froze.

"…What is that?"

She had met many members of the Three Great Families while active on the labyrinth frontlines.

Given that it was the most dangerous threat zone in the world, they were all strong individuals who had manifested and honed their unique abilities. Hence, Atra had experienced Gop-hwa, Changhae, and Taesan.

The chill that could be felt through the screen…

'Changhae?'

Her thoughts stopped. Her mind couldn't keep up with the information in the footage. It was as if her brain refused to accept it.

Lee Hayul manifested Gop-hwa. She already knew. She had seen it used in the tower, thinking he might be related to the Gop-hwa family.

Lee Hayul manifested Changhae…

Why, damn it.

Seeing Atra's expression, Maxwell nodded in understanding.

"This is not all."

"…What else is there?"

Maxwell pointed silently at the footage.

What else could there be?

Atra, trying to gather her scattered thoughts, turned her trembling eyes to the footage.

And then.

– Boom!

With a tremendous noise, the corridor shook. The golden brilliance filling the footage left Atra's mouth agape.

A familiar feeling…

'No.'

It wasn't just familiar. It was more than that.

Close? No, not even that.

It was… it was the aura Atra herself always carried, even at this moment.

The unique ability that was the culmination of her light-attribute magic and skills.

“Midday Sun…”

“Gop-hwa, Changhae, and Clyde’s Midday Sun… All used by one person… Haha, it’s a statement that would be treated as madness.”

Maxwell nodded in affirmation at Atra’s mumbling.

“We needed records for the aftermath, so we had already viewed the observation records. Ah, please don’t misunderstand. It wasn’t Lee Hayul’s observation records but the rampage scene’s records that we reviewed.”

Maxwell hastily added, worried that he might be grabbed by the collar. He didn’t want to lose his expensive tie…

“We thought it necessary for Clyde to know about this, so we requested your presence.”

Maxwell’s explanation reached her ears. But it didn’t fully register. Atra’s mind had long since stopped.

The mental exhaustion from Lee Hayul’s entanglement in the rampage, combined with this… unbelievable scene sticking in her mind, left her unable to think clearly.

‘……’

How should she interpret this?

More importantly, could she handle this situation?

The association had already discovered this scene through observation.

Multiple unique ability manifesters. Rare, but not non-existent. Atra herself possessed two unique abilities.

But someone like Lee Hayul… possessing both Gop-hwa and Changhae simultaneously had no precedent. And with Atra’s Midday Sun on top of that… How did he even use it?

The thought of the storm that would hit the moment this information leaked made her head feel like it was shattering.

“There’s no need to worry.”

“What do you mean, there’s no need to worry?”

“I’m not speaking in riddles. There’s no hidden meaning. It’s exactly as it sounds. The matter you’re worried about won’t happen. The main point starts now.”

Maxwell, as if knowing her thoughts, suddenly began to speak.

“The record of this scene was classified as top secret by the upper echelons before the Disaster Management Department even reviewed it. I was the only one to review it, and I only hold temporary authority to show it to the guardian.”

The upper echelons.

Atra’s expression changed at those words.

“By upper echelons, you mean the main committee members?”

“No. Higher than that.”

Higher than the primary committee members, who held the decision-making power of the association. There were only two positions above them.

The association heads.

The masters of the Tower of Space and the Tower of Harmony, who established and managed the World Superhuman Association and are now in seclusion.

Atra’s expression crumpled.

The meaning of those words was simple.

For reasons unknown, the two association heads… the masters of the Tower of Space and the Tower of Harmony were protecting Lee Hayul.

‘……’

The master of the Tower of Growth, who personally brought Lee Hayul from the orphanage. His unusual special admission status.

The master of the Tower of Space and the Tower of Harmony personally classified the related information as top secret when Lee Hayul got involved in an incident.

Three out of the five tower masters were protecting Lee Hayul? Why?

"That's all I had to convey."

The hologram in the center of the room dimmed. Maxwell, retrieving the hologram device, shook his head with a weary look.

"If it's not an inconvenience, may I take my leave? I have a backlog of work, and if I don't start now, I won't be able to leave for a while…"

Seeing Maxwell, who was equally weary, Atra nodded with a complicated expression.

…

…

A few days later.

Atra's complexion was even worse than before.

Lee Hayul regained consciousness a day ago. His body was in the survival zone.

The severed… torn-off arm was retrieved but had long since become a piece of meat that couldn't be reattached.

There were many other injuries.

Every bone in his body was shattered, circuits were damaged… Muscles were torn, and internal organs were completely crushed.

Despite injuries that could kill him a hundred times over, his body was recovering by some miracle, and Lee Hayul regained consciousness.

And immediately had a seizure.

After a while of gasping in pain, he lost consciousness again.

Atra's mental state deteriorated even further…

Lee Hayul was now in intensive care for stabilization, with even visits restricted.

Aside from Atra, who was constantly waiting outside the treatment room, the only person who had seen him was Liana.

– Rustle

"……!"

A sound came from inside the healing room.

Atra jumped up and pressed the call button nearby. The healer would be here soon.

There was no reason to wait. She carefully opened the door to the healing room.

His eyes were still closed. But seeing his body twitch, it seemed he had regained consciousness.

– Gulp

Atra, with a visibly tense expression, observed Lee Hayul.

Lee Hayul had already had one seizure.

If he had another… Atra's heart might be shattered again.

Lee Hayul's arm moved as if trying to lift his upper body.

It didn't go as he wished. The arm wrapped in a thick cast didn't move as he wanted.

Atra, making her presence known, cautiously approached.

"…Can you hear me?"

She whispered softly, just in case. Lee Hayul's head turned.

They stared at each other in silence. Atra's heart raced. If only he would say something… damn.

A foolish thought. Atra was berating herself internally.

Tears trickled down from the corners of Lee Hayul's eyes.

Thud! A boulder seemed to drop into Atra's heart. Her vision blurred. She opened her mouth urgently, then lowered her voice, afraid of startling him.

"Why, why! Why are you crying…?"

Even as Atra waved her hands frantically, tears streamed down from Lee Hayul's eyes as if his tear ducts were malfunctioning.

– Huuu…

There were even faint murmurs that couldn't be formed into words. The pain and sorrow in those sounds turned Atra's insides pitch black.

Lee Hayul struggled to lift his upper body.

Though his movements were difficult, his body was at least recovering.

He obviously needed to stay hospitalized, but he wasn't at the point where he would crumble at a touch.

Atra hurriedly supported Lee Hayul. If he fell now, it wouldn't be a joking matter.

At that moment.

Lee Hayul suddenly hugged Atra.

Tightly… The sensation felt in her embrace made Atra's body freeze. She lowered her eyes, feeling something at her waist.

Missing an arm. The arm wrapped in a cast, moving awkwardly as if trying to hug her, but it didn't move as desired.

It didn't go as he wished. The arm wrapped in a cast was uncomfortable to move.

Lee Hayul's murmurs were heard again. Filled with sorrow, Atra hurriedly hugged Lee Hayul.

'…What is this.'

Even in her confusion, Atra awkwardly patted Lee Hayul's back as he burrowed into her embrace.

* * *

[Player Adjustment System: Measurement]

…

▸Mental State

[Ruined]: Exhausted and weakened

[Pain]: Physical or mental suffering

[Sense of Loss]: The feeling or emotional state after losing something

[The Curse of the Beautiful and Doomed] is activated.

Drained vitality restores the body.

[The Curse of the Beautiful and Doomed] drains vitality.

[The Curse of the Beautiful and Doomed]: Death is merely a release.

CHAPTER 85
BABY HAYUL (2)

Atra had never experienced taking care of someone in her life.

When her parents were alive, she was the one being taken care of, and she had no siblings or family members she needed to look after.

After losing her parents, she was always alone. She was alone in the orphanage, and at the academy, she was too obsessed with power to form any close relationships.

As soon as she graduated from the academy, she headed to the front lines of the labyrinth, where she spent years before returning to the inner regions a few years ago.

Even after returning to the inner regions, she didn't make any new friends. She only maintained acquaintances. The only new relationship she had formed, her former disciple, had passed away.

In short, Atra was not the type to go out of her way to make friends, nor did she have a sociable nature.

"……"

Therefore, she didn't know how to handle the current situation.

In the healing room where Lee Hayul was hospitalized.

In the cozy atmosphere warmed by the sunlight streaming through the large windows.

Atra let out a deep sigh and looked down at her embrace with a troubled expression.

– Purr…

In her arms was Lee Hayul, sound asleep, making contented murmurs like a pet.

'…What am I supposed to do with this… '

Atra awkwardly patted Lee Hayul's back, recalling the events of yesterday.

After Lee Hayul regained consciousness.

She had watched him with bated breath, expecting another seizure, when suddenly he had burst into tears and clung to her.

The sight of tears welling up in his eyes had made her heart drop, and she had instinctively held him.

Struggling to hug her with his barely functioning arms had been so pitiful that she had ended up hugging him tightly.

– Sniff…

Atra, deciding to comfort him, had patted Lee Hayul's back, but she had found herself staring blankly at him as he sniffled in her arms.

Lee Hayul, with his delicate and fragile appearance, looked even more breakable and in need of protection now that his illness had added to his frailty.

The usually composed and mature façade was nowhere to be found as he clung to her and whined, a sight utterly unfamiliar to her.

After a while of soothing him, the healers had come in.

They had tried to separate him, thinking he needed to be in a proper position for his treatment. With that in mind, she had gently tried to push him away.

– Eee…

…She couldn't bear to push him away. The moment she showed any sign of doing so, he had whimpered and buried his face back into her chest, shaking his head.

His whimpering, filled with sadness and disappointment, had made her freeze. She couldn't push him away.

In the end, the treatment had proceeded with Lee Hayul still in her arms.

‘Damn it.’

Atra couldn’t forget the looks the healers had given her…

But she couldn’t push Lee Hayul away. Conscience? Or maybe it was just human decency that made it impossible to make such a decision.

She had reluctantly offered her embrace.

…

…

…And from yesterday, it had been like this.

Once she offered her embrace, he wouldn’t let go. He clung to her as if her arms were his home, sleeping soundly.

Because of this, Atra couldn’t move, ending up lying on the bed Lee Hayul had been using.

Fortunately, the bed was spacious enough for both of them to lie comfortably.

Since Lee Hayul was in her arms, he didn’t take up much space.

Her mind returned to the present.

Atra let out another deep sigh. Her chest rose and fell with her breath, and Lee Hayul’s cheek, buried in her chest, pressed in and out with the motion.

“……”

Looking at him with an awkward gaze, Atra carefully extended her arm.

Her fingers sank into his hair. The sensation was unlike anything she had ever felt.

She slowly moved her arm.

Sss… Her fingers glided through his hair. After a whole day of petting and patting him, she had somewhat gotten used to it.

Lee Hayul's lips twitched. His face relaxed, and he rubbed his head against her palm with a purr.

Seeing his face relax into a blissful smile filled her vision.

The current image of Lee Hayul overlapped with the one she had seen in the footage.

The face that had been in pain, fighting monsters to protect people, and the face that now clung to her, seeking comfort, overlapped.

And now, the face that acted like a playful puppy, seeking pats, overlapped as well.

Atra regretted it.

She shouldn't have ignored him when he went outside. She shouldn't have dismissed her vague anxiety. She shouldn't have thought it wasn't her place to interfere because she couldn't keep him by her side forever.

There were many other regrets, smaller or comparable.

She had been too caught up in the past. She hadn't properly seen Lee Hayul, who existed in the present. She regretted her attitude, wondering if she had been too harsh and cold.

She had tried her best, but… she should have taught him better. She should've taught him to overcome things more effectively.

Atra felt guilty, thinking that her inadequate teaching had led to his severe injuries.

She could have treated him more gently, but she hadn't.

She had repeated the same mistakes she had regretted in the past, like an idiot.

And it almost ended in irreversible tragedy again.

By some miracle, Lee Hayul had survived. Thankfully, he was breathing in her arms.

Atra got up. She moved carefully, mindful not to make Lee Hayul uncomfortable.

He flinched at the sudden movement and burrowed deeper into her chest.

His breathing felt warm against her chest.

“Hik…”

The strange, unfamiliar sensation made her shoulders tense up.

She had somewhat gotten used to offering her embrace, but the feel of his breath against her skin was something she couldn’t adapt to.

Atra calmed her trembling body.

Once the trembling stopped, she let out another deep sigh.

As she soothed the whimpering Lee Hayul, thinking she was about to separate from him, she adjusted her position.

She turned Lee Hayul’s body and supported his back with one hand.

With the other hand, she picked up the spoon placed within reach.

It was a bowl of porridge and utensils left by a healer with a somewhat peculiar look.

She scooped an appropriate amount of porridge and checked its temperature before guiding the spoon to Lee Hayul’s lips.

“Ah…”

Lee Hayul, who was currently immobile, had lost an arm, and his only remaining arm was wrapped in a thick cast, making it impossible to move.

In other words, he was a patient who needed someone to take care of him.

Confused by the sudden change in position, Lee Hayul’s nose wrinkled.

When she tapped his lips with the spoon, he finally seemed to recognize it and opened his small mouth.

As the spoon went in, his mouth closed around it.

Atra watched his mouth move for a moment before pulling the spoon out.

The porridge on the spoon had long disappeared. Without a word, Atra fed him another spoonful.

This was already the fifth or sixth time she had fed him like this.

The porridge disappeared quickly.

Although it was her first time taking care of a patient, it wasn't difficult. The truly challenging parts were handled by the healers and magic.

All Atra had to do was feed Lee Hayul porridge while he clung to her, coax him into taking his medicine when he refused, and pat him to sleep once his belly was warm…

…It was just like taking care of a baby. His behavior and appearance were the same.

This was different from his usual demeanor. Normally, Lee Hayul didn't act spoiled or whiny.

But considering what he had been through, it was understandable.

A child who had never experienced real combat had tried to save people by fighting monsters in an isolated space.

How many times had he faced death in the process? With every attack that came his way, he must have felt death brushing past him.

And at the end, he had been on the brink of death… It wasn't surprising if he had deep trauma.

In the future, it might hinder his activities as a hero. Many people's past experiences hold them back even after they've grown.

'…If that happens, I should take him to my home.'

Would Lee Hayul want to continue attending Shio-ram? He might whine about not wanting to after recovering his mental state.

If that happens, Atra would take him to live with her.

She hadn't retired yet, but she could submit her retirement papers to the association.

She had saved up a considerable amount of money.

She could live a comfortable life with Lee Hayul under her care.

Feeling a peculiar sense of satisfaction, Atra offered him another spoonful of porridge.

* * *

He couldn't see anything. Darkness enveloped him from all sides.

He didn't use the authority of Observation. The authority of Space was the same.

Trying to use them made his head feel like it was splitting apart.

Maybe it was because he had recklessly used the authority he had just become aware of, or perhaps it was because his circuits and core were injured.

Authority. Not an innate ability, but an externally granted one.

Usually, it was acquired after conquering a tower and being acknowledged as its master.

Why do I have it? Why do I have the authority of Space and Observation?

'Ah.'

My head hurts. I don't want to think…

He cut off the thoughts that were trying to connect. He didn't want to think about anything right now.

He emptied his mind and burrowed deeper into Professor Atra's embrace.

Something soft and warm enveloped his body.

The warmth of another person's body was vividly transmitted through the fabric.

Especially the warmth and softness felt on his face were comforting and pleasant.

Perhaps because he was injured, his senses were relatively dull, but it still felt good.

'Nice… '

He emptied his mind. His thoughts connected simply.

It's warm. I like the softness. I like the hands that stroke my hair and pat my back.

I just like it.

He postponed thinking for later. Anyway, his body was in pain, and his head felt like it was splitting apart.

He just wanted to stay like this until he fully recovered.

* * *

[Player Adjustment System: Affection]

Lee Hayul → Atra Clyde

●●●●●●○○○○(65/100)

[Affection] [Fear] [Expectation] [Concern]

▼(Dramatic Change)▼

Lee Hayul → Atra Clyde

●●●●●●●○○○(65▷70/100)

[Adult] [Guardian] [Expectation] [Comfort] [Affection Longing]

…

●●●●●●●○○○(70▷71/100)

…

●●●●●●●○○○(71▷72/100)

…

●●●●●●●○○○(72▷73/100)

…

[Conditions for lifting the “Curse of Silence” have not been met]

[Conditions for lifting the “Curse of Loneliness” have not been met]

CHAPTER 86
BABY HAYUL (3)

I couldn't be sure if my life had been unhappy up to this point.

But I was certain that this moment was happy.

A few days had passed since I woke up. During that time, I could count on one hand the times I had left the healing room.

That's how severe my condition was.

While nestled in Professor Atra's arms, I had listened to the healers explain my situation.

What did they say… Multiple fractures throughout my body, damaged circuits…

In summary, my bones were shattered, my muscles torn, my circuits destroyed, my core damaged, my internal organs ruptured…

And my left arm was severed…

In any case, I was in a condition worse than a corpse.

Hearing that diagnosis, I tilted my head in confusion.

'Why am I alive?'

I couldn't speak for others, but I definitely wanted to live.

Regardless of hope, I thought it was unlikely I would survive.

Even considering my body's state, it seemed logical that I should have died. Wouldn't it be more accurate to describe my condition as a pile of meat rather than a corpse?

Driven by my own stubbornness, I had charged at the monster and killed Aerulus in

a desperate move.

Just before losing consciousness, I had thought I would die too.

I had a similar experience before.

Showing a similar stubbornness, I had once been hit by a truck while trying to save a person.

At that time, I thought I would die too.

But I had opened my eyes. As I blinked my blurry eyes in confusion, the doctor had made a fuss, talking about miracles and divine luck…

In summary, I should have died back then too, but I had survived.

It's a similar experience.

While pondering, someone's hand rested on my head.

'Ah… '

Soon, hands gently stroked my head as if handling something precious, and my body melted into a puddle.

As I went limp, another hand wrapped around my waist and pulled me closer. Naturally, I nestled snugly into Professor Atra's arms.

It was warm and cozy. The sensation of my worries being pushed away made my barely steady mind relax again.

My head was patted, and my back was gently tapped. My body, enveloped in warmth and softness, relaxed completely…

A smile crept up on my lips. Instinctively, my body squirmed closer. I wrapped my slightly freer right arm, now less hindered, around Professor Atra's waist.

Our bodies clung tightly together, sharing each other's warmth, making it very warm.

I could also hear her heartbeat.

Turning my head, I pressed my ear to Professor Atra's chest, hearing her heartbeat more clearly than before.

'Hehe… '

At our first meeting, Professor Atra was scary.

She was so tall that I had to crane my neck to meet her eyes, and the sheer physical presence and magical intensity I perceived through spatial awareness were overwhelming.

I thought that a flick of her finger would crush me into pieces, leaving nothing behind.

Her demeanor was always stern and cold. The impression was that if I made even the slightest mistake, I would face a harsh scolding or a chilling glare.

She embodied the image of an adult I had in my mind.

But now, this same person was holding me like this, patting and stroking me.

– Chuckle

Sometimes, she would chuckle and ask if I felt good.

A sense of security filled my body. I had an unfounded certainty that everything would be okay as long as I was in her arms.

'Hehe… '

My thoughts stretched out. I felt happy. Such thoughts floated into my mind.

The rationality I had forced myself to maintain was subdued once again.

People often say that living too complicated a life leads to unhappiness.

That thought suddenly came to mind.

…

…

The world had apparently been in an uproar for the past few days. The turmoil was still blazing.

Shipnaha… The chain of dungeon rampages in Scotland.

Commonly referred to as the “Shipnaha Dungeon Rampage” incident.

Hundreds of people died, and thousands were injured in this catastrophe.

It was a dungeon rampage that occurred amidst an otherwise peaceful atmosphere, resulting in significant casualties.

Naturally, investigations followed.

While the boundaries were now blurred, there were still national investigations as well as investigation teams dispatched by the association.

The results were quite shocking.

The disaster in Shipnaha was, strictly speaking, a man-made disaster.

The “Guardians of the Northern Mountains” clan was involved in this disaster.

The Guardians of the Northern Mountains was a clan representing Shipnaha, consisting mainly of mid-to-high-level heroes.

Heroes or hunters of mid-to-high rank wouldn’t be disregarded anywhere.

However, they were widely regarded as lacking the power to enter upper-level dungeons due to the absence of top-level heroes.

In short, they were the head of a snake.

They earned upper-tier profits for a snake, but the sight of a dragon’s tail in front of them had stirred their greed.

In the end, they had made various preparations to become the dragon’s tail, one of which was establishing a farm.

A farm.

Intentionally not collapsing a dungeon, maintaining it, and periodically harvesting its resources and monster by-products.

It wasn't illegal. There were various types of dungeons, and some generated resources that could put gold mines to shame.

In such cases, limited farms were allowed through the association's strict inspections and management.

The Guardians of the Northern Mountains had been operating illegal farms without the association's approval.

Not just one, but several.

The results were disastrous.

Whether due to poor management of the farms or unusual characteristics of the dungeon that showed no signs of rampage.

The farms went on a massive rampage, causing terrible casualties.

And I got swept up in it.

'Damn it.'

The explanation I received shocked me enough to jolt my dazed mind.

Damn it.

Getting caught up in a natural disaster is bad enough, but it was a man-made accident?

If Professor Atra hadn't held and calmed me, I might have thrashed around in my current state, throwing a fit.

Even as I was subdued by the embrace, my teeth ground together.

Gritting my teeth was all I could do.

For some reason, I had new teeth.

I remembered that I had shattered my gums from clenching my teeth in frustration, but they were restored.

Restored.

My thoughts reached this point, and my excitement subsided.

I had similar memories.

When my leg had been shattered, it had gradually restored over time.

My leg had been severed, completely crushed, and they had amputated it. I remembered being out of my mind for days because my leg was missing.

After receiving compensation and holing up in a new house, how many months had passed?

At some point, I had seen a new leg where the empty space used to be and had tried to wake up, thinking it was a dream.

Realizing it was reality, I had been so scared that I didn't tell anyone. I had hidden it, afraid of being treated like a lab rat.

Shortly after that, I had ended up in this world.

I still didn't understand that part. Considering the existence of unique abilities, there might be special abilities I didn't know about.

So, I could still nurture a faint hope. If I waited, maybe my arm would grow back like my leg? Such a hopeful thought.

In any case.

The reasons behind the disaster in Shipnaha and the terrible casualties left in its wake spread throughout the world.

The news constantly featured videos related to Shipnaha.

Experts from various places brought up records from past chaotic times, reminding people of the dangers of dungeons and monsters.

As a result, there were voices reminding people not to get too complacent with peace and to always prepare for dungeons and monsters.

The internet blazed for days.

There were also reports that the Guardians of the Northern Mountains clan and those who had benefited from them, directly or indirectly, were being investigated and arrested.

Seeing how things were unfolding, it seemed like just another human society.

There were crazy people driven by greed, moderately greedy people, ordinary people, and relatively good people.

It was a world where different people lived.

With such ambiguous thoughts, I browsed the internet.

Occasionally, seeing the death toll from Shipnaha filled me with self-reproach…

“Don’t make that face. You did something worthy of praise and respect, never something to be sullen about.”

– Grumble…

Every time, Professor Atra seemed to know how I felt and would pinch my cheek, telling me not to think like that.

Having my cheeks pinched, the gloom rapidly dissipated, and all I could think was that I wanted my cheeks to be touched more.

I felt like a fool.

Killing time, I was absentmindedly listening to news updates on the floating hologram.

[‘City of Hell, Shining ‘Cadet Hero’ in that Place’ Reading the related article.]

'…?'

Did I hear that wrong?

* * *

[Player Adjustment System: Pioneer]

[Quest "Rescue 1 Person" achieved]

[Quest "Rescue 5 People" achieved]

…

[Quest "Rescue 100 People" achieved]

…

[Quest "Rescue 500 People" achieved]

…

[Quest "Rescue 10,000 People" achieved]

…

[Quest "Collapse of a Level 4 Dungeon" achieved]

[Quest "Subjugate Multiple Level 7 Monsters" achieved]

…

[Quest "Subjugate a Level 5 Alpha Entity" achieved]

…

[Quest "Beast of the Red Mist" achieved]

…

[Accumulating remaining points]

…

[Savior Adjustment System: Pioneer]

[Quest “First Trial” achieved]

[Quest “Qualification of the Savior” achieved]

[Accumulating a large amount of points]

CHAPTER 87
HOSPITAL VISIT (1)

In the modern era, after the Great Cataclysm and the chaotic period, the world entered an era of peace.

For decades, there have been two professions that have fiercely contested for the first and second place in surveys of young people's future ambitions worldwide.

Heroes or Hunters.

The positions of idols were always occupied by these two unshakable professions.

There are many reasons for this.

One reason is that it's a profession that only a small fraction of the population can even attempt, thanks to the luck of "Awakening."

Another reason is the staggering average income.

Additionally, the perception of the professions of Heroes and Hunters is prominent.

Heroes are the sword against the disaster of monsters, and the shield that protects humanity.

Hunters are explorers who fully utilize their abilities to traverse unexplored lands and discover all sorts of treasures.

When five children gather, it's not uncommon for conversations about real-life hero stories to emerge.

This was the result of the association's consistent image-making efforts for the professions of Heroes and Hunters.

Those who know the reality understand that, at the end of the day, they are just people and the result of image-making, but nevertheless, everyone harbored a

similar feeling of admiration.

Regardless of rank, becoming a Hero or a Hunter brought with it the gaze of those around them, proving this admiration.

Even though it was image-making, it wasn't creating something out of nothing.

Countless people had died fighting monsters for the sake of humanity.

There were those whose achievements warranted having their names recorded in history, and even those who didn't have their names written down likely sacrificed themselves for humanity.

Shio-ram is an unparalleled institution among those that produce such Heroes.

It's almost embarrassing to compare institutions when one of the five Towers operates it.

News from Shio-ram was something that everyone, not just industry insiders, paid attention to.

[Author: mm]

[Title: Special Admission <— What's this about?]

[Wasn't this a decorative policy from ancient times? Why is it actually happening?]

The news of a cadet with the unprecedented title of "Special Admission" at Shio-ram, which has existed for over a hundred years, became a huge topic.

[Comments]

– The industry is turned upside down because of it.

– Is it true and not just a rumor? I thought it was nonsense.

└ There's a special admission recorded in the admission status. The details will probably be revealed soon.

└ Wow, it's true. I'm so jealous.

└ If you look at the community, it doesn't seem so enviable…

[Author: mm]

[Title: Looked up Shio-ram regulations]

[Regarding the admission procedures

② General admission is conducted through exams designated by Shio-ram's central administration.

⑦ Recommendation admission is conducted through evaluations by Shio-ram's faculty. This is to assess the cadet's aptitude based on the professional judgment of the faculty.

㉑ The Principal has full authority over the selection and management of special admissions.

This was in the regulations from the very year Shio-ram was established.]

[Comments]

– Isn't that from a hundred years ago? Regulations from our grandfathers' era, lol.

– A century-long build-up, crazy.

…

It was a worldwide sensation.

Naturally, the internet was abuzz, ready to chew over and dissect the perfect topic.

[After 100 years since its establishment, Shio-ram's special admission. The identity is a blind person?]

[Comments]

– Do heroes fight with their eyes closed these days?

└ I heard he's a superhuman of the Observation series? If so, can't he replace his eyes

with that?

└ Observation abilities aren't that precise and convenient.

Furthermore, the special admission's unique traits made it an even hotter topic.

A blind person who couldn't see and a mute who couldn't speak.

These were fatal flaws for a Hero, whose job primarily involved combat, and they were not suitable labels for someone with the unprecedented status of special admission.

Thus, regardless of reality or social networks, public opinion on the special admission, Lee Hayul, was…

– Why is he so handsome, damn it.

– Why is a guy prettier than me?

– Damn it, life is such a gacha game.

Surprisingly, the opinion wasn't bad.

An overwhelmingly handsome appearance combined with a unique aura that attracted goodwill.

Sympathy and pity stemming from an unfortunate family background.

There was also the opinion that there must be a reason for the selection made by the Tower of Growth's master…

Of course, there were those who were filled with jealousy and envy, but such voices were in the minority.

The current internet wasn't like the network from before the Great Cataclysm.

The undersea cables that once connected the world had long been devastated by sea monsters.

Satellites that had been launched into space were rendered useless due to the

influence of magical waves.

The current internet, the virtual network, was a function derived from the authority of the Tower of Harmony.

Carelessly spewing blatant desires could result in a summons from the association, making the internet a relatively pleasant space.

Time passed like this.

Industry insiders nodded, saying there must be a reason for the special admission by the Tower of Growth's master, as they heard about Lee Hayul's growth at Shio-ram.

Ordinary people, who hadn't heard this information, continued their peaceful lives, thinking they would find out someday.

[At 12:15 PM local time, a chain of dungeon rampages occurred centered around the Shipnaha region in Scotland.]

The peaceful routine was shattered a few days ago by terrible news.

Even in an era of peace, the news of a disaster striking during an otherwise peaceful time had a significant impact on the world.

At the same time.

The touching story of a young hero who, in the midst of the disaster, protected countless people without regard for his own safety, spread as well.

"…Groan."

"Miss?!"

Hong Yeon-hwa's heart, overwhelmed with emotion, was brutally shredded.

It happened before she could even recover from her repeatedly crushed heart.

It was spring.

…

…

Hong Yeon-hwa was caught by the trials of the Gop-hwa clan, which she thought would be a minor obstacle, and struggled for days.

Her guilt towards Lee Hayul was greater than she realized. It hindered her from moving forward properly.

Had time passed like that, it might have been dangerous. She might have had to call upon the elders of her family for help, and even then, there could have been lasting effects.

But she overcame it.

Not with the help of her family elders, but with another external help.

– [I made it.]

– [It’s not as good as something you’d buy with money, but I hope you like it.]

– [You’re not at fault, Hong Yeon-hwa, so it’s okay.]

– [Please don’t get sick.]

The person she felt guilty towards came directly to reassure her, giving her a handmade gift filled with sincerity.

The red handmade scarf was now carefully stored in the dormitory safe.

She could use it anytime.

But she was too afraid of damaging it to actually use it.

While trembling and moving it, she realized that the scarf itself was a magical item with built-in durability enhancement and temperature control enchantments.

The emotions she felt at that time were indescribable.

With Lee Hayul’s warm sincerity, Hong Yeon-hwa was able to overcome the trial.

That was a few days ago.

– "Miss…"

– "What? Ariel… Why that face?"

– "Well… Young Master is…"

– "…What is it? What happened for you to make that face?"

On the day she stood tall after overcoming the trial.

The news came that Lee Hayul had been caught in a dungeon rampage and was isolated.

The news that Lee Hayul had sustained life-threatening injuries and was unconscious in the intensive care unit struck on the same day.

At that time, her vision had gone red with rage.

If Ariel hadn't stopped her, she would have immediately armed herself and rushed to Scotland.

By the time the news was reported, it was already too late.

Hong Yeon-hwa, who had spent those few days in a living hell, took a warp gate to the United States.

The United States… specifically, the Washington D.C. area had once been swept by monsters, but it still played a crucial role in the world.

This was partly due to its lingering past glory, but mainly because the Tower of Space and the association's headquarters were located here.

Lee Hayul was hospitalized in the intensive care unit of the association's headquarters.

At least dozens of top-level healers were on standby at all times, and in urgent cases, the world's best healers would personally handle the treatment.

That was one of the reasons why Hong Yeon-hwa, whose eyes had nearly turned inside out, managed to calm down.

Hong Yeon-hwa walked silently. An unapproachable aura surrounded her.

Occasionally, people who passed by caught sight of her expression and flinched, but she didn't pay any attention.

Or rather, she didn't have the capacity to care. Her entire mind was focused on Lee Hayul's condition.

"Don't worry too much… well, you should worry, but don't be too disheartened."

Even in the midst of this, a friend's voice barely reached her mind.

Turning her stiff neck, she saw Baek Ahrin, who had come along for the hospital visit.

Baek Ahrin waved the envelope she had brought as a get-well gift.

"The top-level healers are taking care of him, and once he recovers a bit, he'll undergo combined healing and medication, so his arm can regenerate."

The common sense before and after the Great Cataclysm had changed.

The loss of a limb was still a serious injury, but in this world, it wasn't an irrevocable wound.

Knowing this, Hong Yeon-hwa nodded.

Her family had many resources. Money was a given, and there was an abundance of rare medicines that were hard to buy even with money.

'What were those regeneration elixirs again… Anyway, I'll bring them all.'

With thoughts that would cause her mother, Choi Jiyeon, to collapse in despair if she knew, Hong Yeon-hwa stopped walking.

She saw the door. The sign above it had the name Lee Hayul written on it.

Her throat bobbed involuntarily. She had heard about his condition, but she was afraid to confirm it with her own eyes.

If what she saw was worse than she imagined…

– Clench…

She clenched her fist, forcibly cutting off the thoughts she didn't want to consider.

There was no turning back from here.

If his injuries were worse than she imagined, she would just raid her family's vault for more medicine.

She would eventually have the authority to use it, so using it a few years early shouldn't be a problem.

With that resolve, she opened the door to the healing room.

And saw Lee Hayul clinging to Atra as if they were about to join at the navel.

"……"

Was it wrong that the first thing she noticed was the arm wrapped tightly around his waist rather than the fluttering empty sleeve of his left arm?

"Whoa… Wow!"

Baek Ahrin, who had followed Hong Yeon-hwa in and blinked at the sight, suddenly shrieked and jumped back.

She rubbed her arm, feeling goosebumps. The chill and sense of eeriness were palpable.

It was unusual. Especially for Baek Ahrin, who was specialized in ice from the Changhae clan, to feel such a chill?

Surprisingly, this chill emanated from Hong Yeon-hwa, who held the Gop-hwa.

'Should we leave?'

The escape route flashed through Baek Ahrin’s mind.

CHAPTER 88
HOSPITAL VISIT? (2)

To handle Gop-hwa, mental training to control emotional impulses is essential.

For Hong Yeon-hwa, whose output of Gop-hwa was unprecedented, the importance of mental training was particularly emphasized.

Therefore, despite her actions, Hong Yeon-hwa had considerable patience.

However, despite that, she had caused many incidents.

Even thinking back, she couldn't say she had behaved quietly.

Most of those incidents were because there was no need to waste precious mental energy to endure them.

Was it when she was 14?

There was a girl, pretending not to pick a fight, who was still provoking her during a party.

At that time, Hong Yeon-hwa was angry. Not to the point of seething rage, but enough to consider dealing with that girl.

She was angry. Gop-hwa flared up. Her emotions were stirred, and as Hong Yeon-hwa struggled to suppress them, a sudden question arose in her mind.

Did she really need to suppress it?

She did the calculations.

Family? Comparing her family to the Gop-hwa clan was an insult.

Power? Even at a time when she hadn't fully grown, she could handle that girl with one hand.

Other factors? The only thing the girl had over her was age.

There was no significant damage to Hong Yeon-hwa if she dealt with her.

So, pretending it wasn't intentional, pretending it was a mistake, she subtly punched the girl in the face.

What was smeared all over that ugly face that made her fist so sticky…

'……'

It was similar now.

The moment she witnessed Lee Hayul clinging to someone other than herself, her belly twisted in jealousy.

A woman holding Lee Hayul as if he were her own.

Her golden hair and eyes, more dazzling than any light, caught her attention. Her features were well-defined, with no flaws in her appearance.

More than that, the overwhelming aura she exuded was palpable.

Hong Yeon-hwa knew her. Not because she had heard her name as a professor at Shio-ram, but she had heard of her even before that.

'Atra Clyde.'

A notorious woman known for wandering the African wilderness.

Her fame was for being a genuine powerhouse who had made remarkable achievements in subjugating third-tier monsters and for her contributions in preventing monsters from advancing.

Her notoriety was for her irritable and nasty personality, and for beating up heroes who picked fights with her to the point of permanent disability.

Despite her fearsome reputation, it was astonishing to see her now holding Lee Hayul gently as if he were a precious artifact.

Their eyes met.

Red eyes and golden eyes stared at each other.

A moment of silence passed. Hong Yeon-hwa was the first to speak.

“Hello. I’m Hong Yeon-hwa, who mentioned coming for a hospital visit.”

“Hello, I’m Baek Ahrin! Professor Atra, it’s been a while since our last meeting!”

“…Yes, welcome.”

As Hong Yeon-hwa spoke, Baek Ahrin, who had been contemplating whether to run away, hurriedly joined in to greet Atra.

Lee Hayul still seemed to be asleep.

Baek Ahrin didn’t understand why he was asleep in Atra’s arms, but she planned to greet him once he woke up.

“Isn’t it hard taking care of him? You don’t have to do it yourself…”

“It’s not that difficult. For a superhuman, such tasks aren’t physically taxing. Besides, the magical arrangements are excellent.”

“Indeed, the pace of advancement in magical engineering these days is fast. I’m taking a course on it, and the difficulty is…”

After that, they engaged in the usual small talk.

Baek Ahrin mainly led the conversation.

Initially, she was taken aback by Hong Yeon-hwa’s sudden change in attitude, but once she adjusted, she began to speak.

Just as Hong Yeon-hwa observed Atra, Atra also observed Hong Yeon-hwa.

A hospital visit isn’t just about showing up.

The two had asked if they could visit Lee Hayul after his intensive care period ended,

and Lee Hayul had agreed, which is why they were here.

Others would come to visit him later as well.

'Hong Yeon-hwa of the Gop-hwa clan and Baek Ahrin of the Changhae clan.'

Atra knew who they were. In fact, even ordinary people, not just superhumans, would be familiar with them.

They were heirs to three major families. Their names were unavoidable.

After observing Hong Yeon-hwa for a moment, Atra moved her hand.

It wasn't a deliberate movement. It wasn't intended as a provocation. It was just something she had done reflexively over the past few days.

She placed her hand on Lee Hayul's head and pressed down.

Lee Hayul's head was buried deep in her ample chest.

He squirmed for a moment but then calmed down, seemingly finding more comfort in his current position.

Hong Yeon-hwa's lips twitched.

Baek Ahrin, standing beside her, noticed and subtly moved away.

Baek Ahrin had the confidence to suppress fiercely blazing Gop-hwa, but she had no idea how to handle the cold, seeping Gop-hwa emanating from underneath.

Lee Hayul wriggled. It was a familiar sight for Hong Yeon-hwa.

She had seen it many times.

Lee Hayul, nestled in someone's embrace, burying his face in their chest, feeling shy yet deeply relaxed…

The perspective was different.

In her memories, she always saw Lee Hayul's crown and face.

The sensation was always within her embrace, with his heartbeat and sweet scent always surrounding her.

There had never been a third-party perspective like now. She hadn't anticipated it.

Seeing Lee Hayul being held… She endured. Hong Yeon-hwa knew what state Lee Hayul was in.

It was an injury that brushed the threshold of death. Moreover, his first real battle had been such a disaster, so it was natural for him to be mentally affected.

Thus, she understood that he needed human warmth and that his teacher, who had been tough yet caring, was providing it.

However, seeing Atra pressing Lee Hayul's head into her chest even now twisted her insides further.

– Whoosh…

An impulse rose. Her emotions surged violently, and Gop-hwa responded.

But it was different this time.

Gop-hwa didn't erupt violently. It didn't grow ravenously or threaten everything around it.

It burned quietly, more cold than hot, sharpening its edge.

Even Gop-hwa understood that there was nothing to be gained from raging wildly now.

If she lost control now, she could even lose Lee Hayul's trust.

Hong Yeon-hwa shared the same thought.

So she adjusted her expression.

She straightened her raised eyebrows and calmed her twitching lips. She relaxed her tensed facial muscles.

And then she composed her expression again.

Though intentional, it was an expression that came from her emotions, intended to appear gentle and soft.

She also cleared her throat. While she didn't think her voice was bad, she wanted to use her sweetest voice.

"Hayul?"

– Flinch

Lee Hayul flinched. The familiar and welcoming voice that pierced his drowsy mind was filled with warmth.

'Oh.'

That's right. Hong Yeon-hwa and Baek Ahrin were supposed to visit.

With the authority of Observation turned off and his senses dulled, he hadn't noticed.

His mind cleared. The drowsiness that had been enveloping him gradually lifted.

Just before he nearly died, he had longed to see Hong Yeon-hwa's face.

She was someone he wanted to meet.

A sense of joy welled up.

He wriggled. With his arm wrapped around Atra's waist, he tapped her, signaling to be let go.

Though he couldn't see, he still wanted to show his face.

Atra assisted him. She held his waist and turned him around.

He ended up resting his head on her chest and leaning against her.

'…This is… '

It was a peculiar position.

Recently, he had received dedicated care from Atra.

Thanks to her, his severely damaged mental state was recovering.

Along with that, the reason buried deep in his consciousness was slowly resurfacing.

Attached to that reason were feelings of shame and embarrassment.

Not all of it resurfaced. For now, the warmth and comfort of being held surpassed the feelings of shame and embarrassment.

However, doing so in front of those two felt… peculiar.

“Hayul?”

The warm voice approached again.

“Come here?”

Come here.

It was an odd thing to say, but Lee Hayul seemed to understand what it meant.

For some reason, he imagined Hong Yeon-hwa with her arms wide open.

“……”

Though his reason was slowly recovering, it wasn’t fully restored.

Lee Hayul brought out a simple mental scale.

On one side, reason and shame?

On the other side, the softness and warmth of being held. The comforting pats and strokes…

The scale tipped.

Lee Hayul moved his body.

His physical condition had improved considerably. Although he still needed a wheelchair or Atra's help to move around outside, he could walk a bit.

– Hug…

He couldn't move. A hand wrapped around his waist prevented him. It came from behind.

Lee Hayul curiously tilted his head.

Atra, with a somewhat perplexed expression, had wrapped her arms around his waist.

Hong Yeon-hwa's eyes had turned icy cold.

* * *

[Player Adjustment System: Affection Level]

Lee Hayul → Atra Clyde

●●●●●●●○○○ (73▷79/100)

[Guardian] [Protector] [Reliance] [Security] [Affection]

…

Lee Hayul → Hong Yeon-hwa

●●●●●●●●○○ (84/100)

[?] [Sense of Debt] [Guilt] [Gratitude] [Concern]

…

Lee Hayul → Baek Ahrin

●●●●●○○○○○ (50▷51/100)

[Affection] [Curiosity] [Confusion]

[Conditions for breaking the “Curse of Silence” have not been met]

[Conditions for breaking the “Curse of Solitude” have not been met]

…

…

CHAPTER 89
HOSPITAL VISIT? (3)

Sometimes, people act unconsciously.

For instance, when someone is deep in thought and gets startled by a touch, they might instinctively swing their hand.

For superhumans, such ‘unconscious actions’ need to be watched carefully.

Atra is a top-tier hero in combat and interpersonal combat.

With bone strength, muscle density and elasticity, reflexes, and dynamic vision all at their peak, superhumans specialized in close combat possess a powerful physique and honed senses.

If Atra unconsciously threw a punch, even lightly, the impact would not be light.

Of course, as superhumans advance in level, they also gain some control over their unconscious actions, but there are times when this control fails.

Therefore, training to control the level of unconscious actions is essential.

‘Just now?’

Atra blankly looked down at her hand. It appeared smooth at a glance.

Once covered in countless scars and marks, her skin was now smooth, thanks to her exceptional healing abilities.

‘Just now… ’

She had unconsciously wrapped her arm around Lee Hayul’s waist.

The warmth that was once nestled in her arms was gone. Or rather, it tried to leave. The warmth that had been naturally present in her arms tried to leave.

So her hand moved on its own. Atra realized this fact belatedly. It was shocking.

'Recently?'

Atra recalled recent events.

She had unconsciously, almost habitually, held and patted Lee Hayul.

She had heard from a detailed diagnosis that his mental burden, not just his physical injuries, had reached a highly dangerous level.

His physical recovery was progressing smoothly.

In fact, his recovery was unusually rapid, to the point where it was almost strange.

If he continued to recover at this rate, his healing period would be significantly shortened, and it wouldn't be long before he could start regenerating his lost arm.

But she didn't let her guard down.

His mental state had deteriorated, even more than during Liana's late mental health diagnosis.

The results back then were shocking.

She remembered the results showing extreme levels of mental fatigue.

Now, it was even worse. That was why Lee Hayul's mind often wavered as if he was half-asleep even when awake.

Therefore, she paid particular attention to his mental care.

Lee Hayul spent most of his days sleeping, and when he was awake, he was in a daze.

She stayed by his side constantly, comforting him when he groaned in his sleep, possibly having nightmares, by holding him close.

Since he had difficulty moving, she fed him and also administered his medication.

To avoid him feeling stifled being confined to the healing room, she took him out in a

wheelchair for walks in the park.

When he felt down hearing about the victims in Shipnaha, she comforted him, telling him there was no need to be so gloomy.

This was almost a daily routine. Except for the unavoidable times they had to be apart, Lee Hayul spent his time in Atra's arms.

Lee Hayul didn't reject her. In fact, he seemed to prefer being held by her.

Atra didn't find it uncomfortable either.

Lee Hayul's small stature made it easy to hold him, and she didn't feel the usual discomfort of skin contact with another person.

His soft skin and the occasionally sweet scent when he sweated, like honey water, were quite pleasant…

'Thinking like this makes me sound like a pervert… '

Atra shook her head. She had fallen into such deep thoughts that strange ideas surfaced.

Her mind returned. Atra took a deep breath, tidied her disheveled clothes, and lifted her head.

"Whew… Hayul, are you uncomfortable? Are you okay?"

– Shake shake

In Atra's view, Lee Hayul, who was tightly hugged by Hong Yeon-hwa, shook his head side to side.

It was a familiar sight. A scene she had grown accustomed to recently.

It was a sight she had seen while holding him in her own arms.

But now, it wasn't her.

Suddenly, she felt a sense of emptiness. Her arms felt hollow without him.

The satisfying sensation of holding him snugly was gone.

The warmth of shared body heat was gone, and the comforting scent that seemed to heal one's mind and body was gone.

What had been naturally there was now absent.

At that moment.

With a somewhat satisfied expression, Hong Yeon-hwa patted Lee Hayul's back and then moved her other hand.

"…?"

What followed was something Atra couldn't have imagined.

Hong Yeon-hwa adjusted her position slightly and reached her hand to Lee Hayul's stomach, which was covered by his patient gown.

For most creatures, the abdomen is a critical area.

Injury to the internal organs clustered in the abdomen can be fatal.

Yet, that crucial abdomen was being mercilessly handled by another's hand.

Atra's jaw dropped in shock. The unimaginable action left her stammering.

"W-what are you doing?"

"Hm? Oh… this? Temperature regulation."

"…Temperature regulation?"

Her eyes silently questioned, and Hong Yeon-hwa responded with a look that seemed to say why ask something so obvious. In fact, Hong Yeon-hwa even slipped her hand inside the clothes.

"For a Gop-hwa user, body temperature fluctuates when their condition is poor. Didn't you often deal with this when taking care of him?"

Atra knew this. She had encountered many members of the Gop-hwa clan on the frontlines and was aware of the side effects of their unique ability.

She also knew about Lee Hayul's fluctuating temperature. Thus, she made sure he was properly covered with blankets and monitored his temperature while holding him.

Even as she continued explaining, Hong Yeon-hwa's hand didn't stop. The hand inside the patient gown rubbed Lee Hayul's stomach.

Lee Hayul, who had been squirming as if ticklish, stopped struggling as he felt the warmth on his stomach.

As she gently soothed Lee Hayul, Hong Yeon-hwa continued her explanation.

"So, we transfer the warmth of Gop-hwa through physical contact. It's a simple and effective emergency treatment."

The explanation ended. Atra wasn't fully convinced.

It was hard to believe that such an indecent-looking act was a form of emergency treatment.

But she couldn't refute it.

Atra had seen Lee Hayul use Gop-hwa. She didn't know why or how, but witnessing it was undeniable.

Hong Yeon-hwa possessed Gop-hwa.

As the heir of the Gop-hwa clan, she would be more knowledgeable about Gop-hwa than anyone. How could Atra argue against her?

However, Atra didn't like it.

Watching such a scene unfold before her eyes didn't sit well with her.

It wasn't pleasant.

An inner turmoil stirred within her.

At that moment, Hong Yeon-hwa, who was looking down at Lee Hayul, lifted her gaze.

Their eyes met.

"……"

"……"

Even while pretending otherwise, their glares clashed in the air.

Why?

Atra sensed similar emotions in Hong Yeon-hwa's gaze.

'…Should I have come alone?'

Caught in the middle, Baek Ahrin broke out in a cold sweat.

* * *

Hong Yeon-hwa and Atra, staring coldly at each other.

Between them, like the contents of a sandwich, Baek Ahrin, who had been trying to keep the conversation lively, sighed deeply inside.

'…Should I have come alone later?'

Despite his small and adorable appearance, and his typically docile and timid nature, making Lee Hayul quite popular, anyone observant would notice a certain barrier in how he interacted with others.

Baek Ahrin particularly noticed that the barrier was even thicker when it came to her.

Why? She didn't know. The barrier had been there since she first met Lee Hayul.

For her own goals, Baek Ahrin needed numerous powerful allies.

Therefore, she was getting acquainted and building friendships with various cadets.

Among them, special admission student Lee Hayul was someone she had to befriend.

However, he seemed to fear her, so Baek Ahrin felt the need to break down this psychological barrier somehow.

Her trick? The cheat code was Hong Yeon-hwa.

The interest Hong Yeon-hwa showed toward Lee Hayul was significant.

There wouldn't be anyone at Shio-ram who didn't know this fact or rumor.

Hong Yeon-hwa was exceptionally weak towards Lee Hayul.

The reverse was also true.

Lee Hayul, who acted like a wary puppy, wagged his tail solely for Hong Yeon-hwa.

So, she thought she could increase his affection by tagging along with Hong Yeon-hwa for the visit…

…But seeing the chilly atmosphere swirling in the healing room, it didn't seem like a very good choice…

'Why does he fear me?'

From their first meeting, she was puzzled.

Baek Ahrin tilted her head.

Did Lee Hayul have a bad experience with the Changhae clan?

It was strange.

The Changhae clan's area didn't overlap with the orphanage Lee Hayul had been in.

There was no Changhae member active in that vicinity. In fact, there was no reason for any contact related to Baek Ahrin.

Yet, a thick psychological barrier had been erected against her.

Baek Ahrin tried to see through him whenever she was around Lee Hayul…

'Sigh… '

She didn't have much success.

She could only reconfirm that Lee Hayul found her frightening and unsettling.

However, it also seemed like he had a favorable view towards her in some ways.

Even during the post-admission celebration, when she tried to take him outside on the pretext of Hong Yeon-hwa's request, she expected him to refuse.

But Lee Hayul didn't refuse. Even though he was intoxicated, he followed her obediently like a well-behaved child.

He found her frightening. Yet, he also seemed to have or want to have a positive view of her.

'Hm.'

At that point, Baek Ahrin sorted her thoughts.

Lee Hayul had no connection to her before Shio-ram.

The first time he met her was inside Shio-ram.

So, there was something in their first meeting that caused him to feel repulsion.

From an objective perspective, Baek Ahrin thought she didn't have any traits that warranted dislike.

It wasn't narcissism; it was a fact.

Her appearance was strikingly beautiful.

Her figure was well-balanced, with ample curves and slim proportions.

She didn't have a malicious personality that tore others down.

She had plenty of wealth.

The power of her family was well-known.

Her strength was growing, and her growth potential was exceptionally high.

Yet, Lee Hayul found her frightening…

There was something to be feared… inside her.

Baek Ahrin solidified her expression beneath her 'mask'. The chilling heart she could feel even now.

The damn curse that clung to her from birth exuded a foreboding and eerie aura.

If Lee Hayul could see through this curse? Did his perception ability include sensing the curse? If so, his repulsion made sense.

If not for the 'mask,' she would likely be viewed with ominous suspicion by countless people because of the curse.

'…Then it's a mess.'

From the start, her first impression was that of a cursed woman with a heart of darkness.

'No, it wasn't entirely like that.'

While Lee Hayul did show repulsion, he also showed favor.

There was hope. If she could exploit that favor effectively, she could build a rapport that surpassed the curse's repulsion.

That was why she had spared time from her studies to come here.

She had no intention of living with this kind of thing. She would remove it somehow.

'Whether I survive until then is another matter… '

Baek Ahrin stood up with a bitter smile.

Then she approached the bed.

Lee Hayul, who was sharing warmth with Hong Yeon-hwa, lay down and fell into a deep sleep.

'Healing… well, I'll just pour in the Changhae energy.'

Baek Ahrin came for a hospital visit, bringing a gift and intending to help with the healing.

The Changhae's energy flow had the attribute of healing magic.

Unlike other healing abilities, it wasn't just simple healing and regeneration but also enhanced the restorative properties of the target's vitality.

In crude terms, it was like a self-recovering potion that worked on its own.

Additionally, Baek Ahrin had medical knowledge and had learned professional healing magic and the Changhae clan's traditional healing methods.

Although the effect might not be significant on Lee Hayul, who was already receiving intensive healing, it wouldn't be entirely ineffective, and it would be good to claim credit later.

– Wooo…

Changhae's energy welled up in Baek Ahrin's palm.

And then.

Baek Ahrin sensed Changhae's energy.

'…Huh?'

Inside her 'mask,' Baek Ahrin's face stiffened. Her fingertips froze.

She felt the Changhae energy emanating from her palm. That was expected. She was controlling it herself.

…There was more.

Apart from her own, there was another source of Changhae energy in the healing room.

It wasn't being actively used. It was more like the remnants of past usage.

That energy… where the arm had unnaturally disappeared.

It was lingering around Lee Hayul's shoulder.

Baek Ahrin thought carefully. She recalled the list of Changhae members dispatched globally.

There was no Changhae member dispatched to the association's intensive care unit.

No Changhae member was active in Shipnaha either.

"Why? Is there a problem?"

Hong Yeon-hwa asked Baek Ahrin, who had suddenly stopped.

"No, nothing. I was just concentrating."

Baek Ahrin shook her head. She then smiled as if nothing had happened and continued using Changhae.

Throughout the process of channeling Changhae.

Baek Ahrin's gaze remained fixed on Lee Hayul's shoulder.

– Flinch

Lee Hayul's body twitched as if reacting to her gaze.

– Ding! Ding! Ding!

A peculiar alarm rang in his hazy consciousness as he slept.

Lee Hayul's smartwatch had been retrieved and was stored separately.

* * *

*

* * *

– Ding! Ding! Ding!

[Savior Adjustment System: Destruction Path]

[Detected “Curse of Eternal Winter”!]

[The system strongly rejects Eternal Winter!]

[When the Savior faces Eternal Winter, the system will fully support the Savior!]

…

[Savior Adjustment System: Pioneer Path]

[Main Quest “Tower of Eternal Winter” generated!]

[Savior, drive away the approaching Eternal Winter!]

CHAPTER 90
NOT BELOW, BUT ABOVE

My body, which had been given grim diagnoses like permanent aftereffects, death during treatment, or retirement, was recovering splendidly beyond expectations.

My broken and crushed bones were healing, and my damaged organs were functioning properly.

My muscles were gradually recovering too, allowing me to not only walk but even run.

My body would soon be fully healed.

Moreover, soon enough, I might even have the energy to attempt regenerating my arm. I was still contemplating that issue.

And my mind, which controlled my body, had recovered significantly too.

Now, even when awake, I could think normally.

However, there were side effects.

As my reason gradually regained strength, actions taken when emotions had taken over my body while reason was pushed aside began to surface one by one…

My face flushed. Even without using Gop-hwa, my body felt heated. It was embarrassing. I wanted to crawl into a hole and hide…

I wanted to eliminate any possibility of being observed from the outside. I pulled the blanket over my body.

'How long have I been holed up in the healing room… '

A few days had passed since Hong Yeon-hwa and Baek Ahrin visited. Since that day, my condition seemed to have improved a bit more.

It was probably because Hong Yeon-hwa transferred the warmth of Gop-hwa to me.

Gop-hwa… Perhaps using Changhae together caused some issues with my body temperature.

My body temperature, which had been erratic, suddenly becoming hot and cold, had somewhat normalized since that day.

Recalling the method of warmth transfer using Gop-hwa made my face heat up again.

The inside of the blanket felt like a sauna, and I kicked it off irritably.

– Whoosh

'Ugh… '

The temperature in the healing room was controlled, but the air felt cold compared to my body temperature, hitting my skin.

I shivered and pulled the blanket back over me appropriately.

The memory of that day was an embarrassing one I didn't want to recall.

Being held in Hong Yeon-hwa's arms… I hated how accustomed I had become to it, but that wasn't enough to make me kick the blanket.

However, having my belly touched was something entirely different. Especially when it was my bare skin and not just through clothes, it was even more embarrassing.

There were many other embarrassing memories. I had been quite childish in front of Professor Atra.

It was humiliating and shameful. Not just the actions themselves but the fact that I didn't reject them and even thought they were pleasant at the time embarrassed me.

I wanted to reject it. I wanted to forget those memories and deny that I wasn't in my right mind at the time…

'But I can't do that… '

In the past, I would have denied it, but now I couldn't.

Taking a deep breath, I turned my body over. The soft texture of the bed pressed against my back.

My face was turned upward.

There was no sky to be seen. It was obvious since there was a ceiling. If I used the power of Observation? Maybe I could see it.

I moved my remaining right hand. I touched the place where my left arm should be.

The empty space where my left arm should have been was disheartening.

'Damn it… '

During the struggle with Aerulus, I had assumed I would die there.

Thinking I wouldn't make it out alive anyway, I decided to take that bastard down with me. In that process, I figured since I'd die regardless, I might as well sacrifice an arm.

But I survived. Minus an arm.

Sometimes, the phantom pain of my chewed-off arm drove me crazy.

'If I knew I'd survive, I would've been more careful… '

It was a futile regret.

If I hadn't used my arm as bait, if I hadn't reached out to close the distance, the Changhae might have missed.

Using Changhae twice was impossible. If it missed the first time, I had no means to restrain him.

Naturally, my subsequent Midday Sun wouldn't have hit, and I would've died there alone…

Regret filled me. As I lay there, reflecting, I realized there might have been better

ways to handle it.

I even regretted not just running away… even now that I had survived.

But…

'Even if I had run away, I would've regretted it.'

I would have regretted it either way. Would I have stopped at regret? Having become a person similar to my parents, would I have wanted to live?

'…I shouldn't deny it.'

I realized my unique abilities.

Mana Affinity and Jack of All Trades.

The system? Or something related to [Savior] that I thought had intervened and given me these abilities.

I was wrong. I had completely misunderstood. The spatial and observational powers I thought were spatial perception were granted, but these two were not.

These were abilities I had inherently possessed.

No one had interfered. It wasn't an externally granted power. Even if it had been guided to bloom, it was an innate trait I had always held.

Why did I realize it only now? Being on the brink of death played a part.

To be precise, being on the brink of death, I realized the 'uniqueness' of myself.

There were distinct, albeit tiny, unique traits, as well as significant ones like Jack of All Trades and Mana Affinity that represented me.

So, going forward, I must not deny my uniqueness, the elements that make up who I am.

'Lee Hayul.'

My name.

Regardless of who named me, it fundamentally represents me.

Lee Hayul, who runs around foolishly trying to save people because he can't abandon his conscience, was me.

Lee Hayul, who wanted to cry and run away but ultimately didn't and charged at the monster, was me.

Even now, regretting the choices made while surviving and thriving, is also me.

And.

Lee Hayul, who whimpered in Professor Atra's arms, is also me.

Lee Hayul, who refused to take medicine despite not being able to taste bitterness, and sought warmth in a snug embrace because he didn't like the cold, is also me.

Lee Hayul, who now feels embarrassed and ashamed of those times, is also me.

All of it is me. I must not deny it. I must not deny the uniqueness that makes up who I am.

It had taken me so long to realize my unique abilities because I had been in denial for so long.

The most basic method to train unique abilities is to reflect on oneself.

I learned this at Shio-ram, and I knew it from the original work's knowledge.

Yet, I never applied it to myself. I prematurely concluded that it wouldn't be effective for me because I was special and different.

I made a mistake. It couldn't be helped. I am not omniscient and omnipotent; I am not a perfect superhuman without mistakes.

But if I made a mistake, I must strive not to repeat it next time.

So, I must accept it. Even the embarrassing and shameful Lee Hayul is ultimately me,

And the dirty-hearted Lee Hayul who regrets saving people is also me.

'I don't want to regret.'

Living as a human means inevitably having to choose among various options.

The moments of choice won't end with just once; they will come countless times throughout life.

Someone wishy-washy like me will regret every moment.

But I want to regret less.

I regret not running away at Shipnaha, but if I had run, I would have regretted it to the point of wanting to end my life.

It was an incident within my awareness.

It was a crisis I could sufficiently help with.

It was a crisis only I could resolve.

That's why I charged in.

Then, what should I do moving forward?

I recalled the knowledge from the original work.

The Tower of Necromancy.

The Tower of Eternal Winter.

The Tower of Purgatory.

Disasters I whimsically thought of as my ultimate goal.

I knew those towers would become active soon.

I also knew the damage would exceed the level of ruining a country or two.

I recognized the incident. I knew I could help with it, even if only a little.

So, am I the only one who can resolve it? There are many people better than me, do I really have to do it?

I continued my thoughts absentmindedly.

'Ah.'

While pondering, I suddenly extended my right arm.

I grabbed the box placed on the floor next to the bed. Carefully, I pulled it into my arms.

The box, which fit snugly in my arms, was filled with countless papers.

I had gained quite a bit of fame from the Shipnaha incident. Many images of me, released from the recognition-disabling magic through an artifact containing the power of Observation, were captured.

They said they edited it appropriately so that it wouldn't cause me too much trouble and then broadcasted it.

As a result, my recognition and fame increased significantly, and letters poured in, enough to fill this box.

This box wasn't the only one.

Many letters were from people I directly saved, and many were from others who heard the news globally.

I blankly caressed the letters.

They were a bit crumpled and felt cold to the touch.

But they also felt warm at the same time.

'…I.'

I didn't want to die. I valued myself more than others. I wanted to break the curse

and live peacefully. I wanted to eat delicious food and live a leisurely life.

'I want to be happy.'

That's what Lee Hayul, the person, wanted.

I wanted to be happy.

And if possible, I wanted others to be happy too.

Happy laughter sounded better than unhappy crying.

Hearing that handwritten letters full of gratitude arrived even in this modern era where the internet was restored through the Tower of Harmony, I felt a sense of pride swell in my chest.

If possible, I wanted others to be happy too.

At my level, if I could dare to, I wanted to be happy, and I wanted others to be happy too.

Is it possible? The letters gave me the answer.

Professor Atra told me. The visitors during the hospital visit told me.

There were people I couldn't save, but there were also people I saved. They said there were people who wouldn't be alive if I hadn't stepped in. Thanks to my intervention, many who were supposed to die survived.

'I've decided.'

I've set my goal once again.

In any case, I have to prevent apocalyptic disasters to survive myself.

I don't want to die miserably. I don't want to live happily but die shortly.

I'll do my best.

So that I can regret less.

So that I can later say I did my best at that time.

The sky was still not visible. It was blocked by the ceiling, so it was obvious.

Also, it was obvious I couldn't see it because I was looking down.

Thinking I could see above while looking down was foolish.

From now on… I will strive to lift my head.

Facing death made me realize many things.

It was laughable to be perpetually caught in the shadow of my dead parents. It was time to shake it off.

I steadied my mind and restructured my path for growth.

My plan to obtain the Necklace of Confession had failed miserably, so I devised a new plan.

I assumed that hidden pieces with easy acquisition difficulty, including the Necklace of Confession, would already be taken, and I thought of elements I could use.

'Ah, but the necklace is such a pity… '

If I had at least sold it, I could have made a lot of money…

It was a huge regret. If I had obtained the Necklace of Confession, I could continue to ignore the Curse of Silence in the future.

But what can be done about reality? I could only swallow my regret.

– Creak

"Did anything happen?"

After a few hours passed, Professor Atra, who had left for personal errands, rushed in.

She strode towards me and hugged me as I sat on the bed.

Soft and warm heat enveloped my body completely.

'…I'm happy.'

I accepted myself.

So I must not deny this feeling…

* * *

Finally discharged, it was the day after I returned to Shio-ram.

"Our family isn't that great, so this is all I can give you, hehe… But I think it will definitely help you, Hayul!"

In Elia's outstretched hand… Resting in her palm was a neatly arranged necklace.

From the information collected by the power of Observation, I felt the shape of the necklace.

A silver necklace that, rather than being fancy, was better described as simple.

The immature power of Observation also partially grasped the providence contained in the necklace.

A providence that reads the wearer's mind and expresses it through voice…

'This… '

The same appearance. Plus, an oddly familiar ability…

'It's the Necklace of Confession… '

The item I had given up on obtaining, why was it here…

I stood there, gaping in astonishment.

CHAPTER 91
DISCHARGE

This world does not use the Gregorian calendar.

To be precise, the Gregorian calendar ended in the year 2000.

On March 1, 2000, a great upheaval occurred.

Concepts like dungeons, towers, monsters, and magic, which only appeared in myths and legends, manifested.

Moreover, a very small number of humans began to develop transcendental abilities once only imagined in dreams.

This world, which seems similar to the original world, has undergone a transformation so profound that no one can deny it's different.

It is no longer the Gregorian calendar.

Currently, it is the 200th year of the New Era (新界起源), which started with the great upheaval.

Today is a particularly special day.

I felt a mix of small excitement and anxiety as I took off my patient gown.

'Finally… '

Today is the day I get discharged.

My body, which was in a state worse than a rag, has roughly recovered.

That's because the care I received was extremely thorough.

Top-tier healers, who can't be hired even with money, took turns checking my

condition like a rotation.

Even the highest-tier healer, who usually reserves their power, visited periodically to heal me.

In an environment like this, the only thing they can't save is a corpse.

The problem was my condition, so bad that I couldn't even complain if buried with a corpse.

It wasn't just my body being torn and crushed; the blood mist deeply ingrained in the wounds was disrupting and hindering the healing process.

I was genuinely on the brink of being buried alongside a corpse. Even thinking about it now sends chills down my spine.

'Almost three weeks, huh… '

It took over three weeks for my body to recover almost fully, excluding the loss of my arm.

Three weeks.

If you just hear it, it sounds like a short time.

But considering that I, who had the physical abilities of an ordinary person, caught up to the level of a Shio-ram cadet's footsteps within that period… it was a precious time wasted.

Especially since I hadn't resolved my lifespan issue yet, wasting three weeks like that was painful.

'The schedule ahead… '

The biggest event, the first-semester Tower Entrance, is over.

Dungeon practice in between won't be a big problem.

The major event to pay attention to is…

‘Is it just the comprehensive evaluation left for this semester?’

Comprehensive Evaluation.

They’ve given us several months of growth lectures from world-class professors and allowed us to enter the Tower of Growth once.

They also provided ample time to consolidate the results obtained from the Tower of Growth.

Now it’s time to properly measure how much we’ve grown, that’s the comprehensive evaluation.

If I remember correctly, there will also be written exams and tests by majors.

And since it’s an educational institution for nurturing heroes, the most attention-grabbing test is the comprehensive combat section.

All cadets, regardless of majors, participate in a 1-on-1 duel.

As a special admission student, I’m sure to participate.

The stakes are high, and the grades at stake are significant. If you take first place there, you’ll undoubtedly get a good artifact.

Cadets who wanted to achieve good results in the comprehensive evaluation must have been preparing all along.

Unlike someone who got stuck in the healing room as soon as the tower entrance ended.

‘Is this a greedy thought? I should be grateful just to be alive… ’

I realized my greed was overflowing. Taking a deep breath, I threw a punch into the air.

The punch sliced through the air. I could keenly feel the wind brushing my arm. As my body recovered, my senses naturally returned.

‘With this, I can jump right into combat?’

It seemed I had even improved. Perhaps because I skipped rope over the line of life and death? My desperate body seemed to have grown.

While thinking such thoughts.

– Tap

'?'

A hand flew swiftly from the side and grabbed my wrist. My arm, unable to stretch straight, bent awkwardly.

I turned my head in puzzlement. Within my observational range, Professor Atra was grabbing my wrist with a firm expression.

Her hand, which released my wrist, promptly moved toward my face.

– Squeeze…

'Huh?'

And then, my cheek was pinched. One side of my cheek, caught between her slender fingers, stretched like mochi.

Tilting my head in confusion, Professor Atra let out a deep sigh and spoke.

"I told you to take it easy for a while, so why are you suddenly punching the air?"

'Is it just because of that…?'

I did put a bit of strength into it, but it wasn't enough to cause any harm.

Wearing an expression of disbelief, I saw Professor Atra narrow her eyes.

My cheek stretched a bit more. It didn't hurt. Instead, I had to control my expression to not show that it felt rather nice.

"No matter how good the diagnosis result is, you still need to observe it for a day or two."

– Nod nod

As I obediently nodded, Professor Atra's stern expression softened.

Then, as if she felt a bit guilty, she gently rubbed the cheek she had pinched.

My lips twitched. I tried to keep my lips from twitching as I accepted Professor Atra's touch.

After indulging in her touch for a while, I went through the discharge procedures.

Though my body was almost fully healed, I naturally expected the discharge process to be complicated.

The intensive care unit at the association's headquarters is truly a place to save those who must not die.

I received exceptional treatment even within the intensive care unit. Therefore, I anticipated the procedures would take some time.

"Discharge procedures? Oh… they're already taken care of. You can just go."

'?'

And then, I heard something akin to a high-pass.

I blankly scanned the person within my observational range.

Dressed in a clean white gown, typical of a doctor, and holding a white stick… in her mouth.

For a moment, thinking it was a cigarette, I stiffened, but seeing the candy through her slightly parted lips, my tension melted away.

The woman with an emaciated look and roughly tied hair was named Lianel Steinlea.

She was the association's healer who saved me, almost a corpse, a precious highest-tier healer.

"What do you mean, the procedures are done?"

“An association staff member started them from the first day you were admitted and completed them. You can just go.”

Lianel explained indifferently.

“Oh, and the staff member asked me to tell you. Since you made significant contributions to saving lives during the disaster, blah blah… they’re planning to reward you, so contact them when you have time.”

“They did consider letting me rest comfortably to some extent.”

Lianel had once been active on the African front, and it seemed she had built a bit of rapport with Professor Atra during that time.

Hearing the explanation, Professor Atra narrowed her eyes as if puzzled.

“It’s almost like VIP treatment. But they don’t even treat actual VIPs this way, do they?”

“How would I know what the higher-ups think? They must have their reasons for doing this.”

As she replied, Lianel turned her gaze to me.

“It seems you were someone the higher-ups deemed necessary to save. So, Cadet Lee Hayul, please don’t come back here again unless absolutely necessary.”

When a doctor tells you not to come to the hospital, it probably means don’t get sick, right?

As I nodded with a peculiar expression, Lianel briefly nodded and continued.

“The healing is done. Once you regain some energy, you can proceed with arm regeneration. The association has also taken care of it, so you can come here for the regeneration or do it elsewhere. Take good care of your mental health too. And…”

A brief pause.

“Take good care of yourself.”

The final words made me smile.

Though relatively blunt and with faint emotions, concern was evident.

Lianel, who had been looking down at me, blinked.

The end of the lollipop bobbed. As if contemplating something, she gently bit the stick and opened her mouth again.

“The diagnosis was clearly normal. I’m seeing you right now, and you’re normal. But…”

“But?”

Professor Atra frowned at the nuance that seemed to deny the word ‘normal.’

“Cadet Lee Hayul’s body felt strange. I hate to say this to a patient, but it felt like…”

– Like a person who should have died is still alive.

With Lianel’s words, the doubts I had been feeling and past memories surfaced.

Excessive and continuous violence too much for a child to endure.

Memories of my split stomach healing miraculously by the next day.

A body that endured having fire poured over it, wandering for long periods without proper food, yet survived.

Legs that regenerated despite being clearly cut off…

‘……’

The unique abilities I’ve identified are Mana Affinity and Jack of All Trades.

But I kept feeling like there was something more.

I couldn’t grasp it. Even in the healing room, I contemplated myself whenever I had time, but I couldn’t feel it.

There seemed to be something more.

In any case, the healer's advice(?) marked the end of the discharge process.

"Head back first. Let me emphasize again, don't leave Shio-ram."

Professor Atra said she couldn't enter Shio-ram right away due to personal matters.

Since I was discharged over the weekend, she planned to take care of personal matters over the weekend and come to Shio-ram.

At the association's headquarters gate terminal.

Professor Atra, with noticeable anxiety, grabbed my shoulder and demanded a response.

I nodded calmly as if to reassure her, despite the countless repetitions of her demands.

But the worry on Professor Atra's face didn't disappear.

'…Hmm.'

It felt overly protective, but considering my condition, which I sensed through the power of Observation, where it was hard to distinguish if it was a body, a corpse, or a rag… it seemed understandable.

With her worried gaze piercing my back and the back of my head, I stepped into the gate.

With a dizzying sensation, I stepped into the cradle, feeling like I returned in no time.

– Ding!

The moment I arrived at Shio-ram's gate terminal, an alarm sounded in my ears.

The sound was clearly from close by… definitely from me.

This time, I didn't miss it. With the sound, I furrowed my brows and observed the place where my left arm used to be.

There was no left arm. There was no smartwatch on my left arm.

Likewise, there was no smartwatch on my right arm.

I had a portable hologram projector, but the alarm didn't come from it.

I had experienced something similar before.

But back then, I thought it was a hallucination in my sleep or a sound from the smartwatch and passed it off.

'…This.'

I couldn't just pass it off this time.

'Isn't there a status window?'

The suspicion I had given up when I first arrived in this world subtly resurfaced.

While I was pondering this, a hesitant voice reached my ears.

"Um… Cadet Lee Hayul?"

'Ah.'

I realized I was standing right in front of the gate.

Quickly, I moved out of the way.

The staff on duty were staring at me.

Covering my flushed face with my sleeve, I hurried out of the gate terminal.

That day, I spent the entire day checking for the status window and pondering various things.

Receiving a sudden contact from Elia asking if I had time.

Meeting the Necklace of Confession, which practically eased my mind, and hugging Elia impulsively was the next day.

* * *

– Ding!

[Lee Hayul has entered Shio-ram]

…

[The “Curse of Short-lived Beauty” consumes vitality… consumes… consumes…]

– Buzz…

[The Lord of the Tower of Growth suppresses the “Curse of Short-lived Beauty”]

[The Lord of the Tower of Growth suppresses the “Curse of Short-lived Beauty”]

[The Lord of the Tower of Growth suppresses the “Curse of Short-lived Beauty”]

…

[The Lord of the Tower of Growth sighs in relief]

* * *

CHAPTER 92
NECKLACE OF CONFESSION (1)

News spread that I had returned to Shio-ram.

As a result, my hologram was flooded with messages from cadets I didn't even know.

Though it wasn't through my smartwatch but my hologram projector, the account was the same, so the contacts and settings remained unchanged.

'Hmm?'

I was sitting on my bed, sifting through the mountain of messages.

▸Elia Slade (recently contacted)

There was a cautious request from Elia, asking if I could spare some time.

Not knowing what it was about, I decided to leave the dormitory, saying I'll see her soon.

I had many things to do.

Though I refrained from moving my body too harshly for fear of Professor Atra's retribution, I still needed to catch up on the lectures I had missed.

'This is tough… '

I had fallen far behind in my studies. I was already worried about the midterm exams…

'I need to get used to functioning with just one arm quickly.'

The loss of one arm had made my entire body sluggish. The imbalance in my body was significant.

Moreover, with the arm that used to wear the smartwatch gone, I was now carrying a portable hologram projector around.

Maybe I should ask the association to modify a smartwatch to hang around my neck?

Sighing deeply at the thought, I touched the place where my left arm used to be.

All I felt was the sleeve flapping weakly in the wind.

The wing feathers of the heavens, which had become rags like their owner, were retrieved from the scene.

They were now restored, consuming my mana, and flapped behind me along with my sleeves.

Before leaving the dormitory, I considered cutting or tying up the left sleeve but decided against it, thinking it would be too conspicuous.

'……'

But now, feeling the gazes fixed on me… especially on my flapping sleeve, I regretted not cutting it off.

They say humans are creatures of adaptation.

Amazingly, I, who used to be a recluse, adapted to the attention focused on me.

After my status as a special admission student was revealed, I adapted to the overwhelming attention. Now I could walk around with a semblance of composure.

Such attention generally consisted of curiosity, jealousy, bewilderment, and greed.

Now, it was a very ambiguous emotion.

Admiration? Envy? Pity?

It was a very awkward and escape-inducing gaze…

Regretting it belatedly, I hurried my steps.

Before long, I arrived at the cafe whose address Elia had sent.

Elia was waiting in a private room, having arrived earlier.

As I entered the private room of the cafe,

“Ha, Hayul…”

Elia’s eyes flickered as she looked at my empty left arm.

Her eyes soon grew moist, and she began to shed large tears like chicken droppings.

‘Oh no.’

I waved my arm frantically in panic.

It took a while to calm Elia down.

…

No matter what anyone says, the top priority curse to lift is the Curse of Short-lived Beauty.

To be honest, attempting to lift the Curse of Silence, given the current uncertainty of even lifting one curse, was overly optimistic.

An uncharted tower is suicidal to even approach, let alone conquer.

Even dungeons where the Jewel of Exorcism is located are as dangerous as Level 1 dungeons.

In a Level 1 dungeon, the standard hierarchy of monsters that appear is around Level 5.

Though not as dangerous as Aerulus, who made a corpse out of me in Shipnaha, similar beings roam around like common mobs.

Level 1 dungeons are rare even in areas beyond human reach or regions where the association’s influence is limited.

Finding the Jewel of Exorcism in such a dungeon is extremely difficult.

Therefore, lifting the Curse of Silence, which is next in line, is practically impossible.

The Curse of Silence.

One of the three curses on me, it took away my voice.

In the first place, the Curse of Silence had the lowest priority for lifting.

The Curse of Short-lived Beauty that drastically shortens my lifespan.

The Curse of Sensory Sealing that seals my vision, smell, and taste, stripping away life's convenience and joy.

Compared to these two, the Curse of Silence, which just blocks my voice, was not a severe issue.

However, living with it turned out to be quite inconvenient.

It wasn't a problem when I was a recluse, but now that I attended Shio-ram and needed to communicate with others frequently, it was a different story.

My low level of social skills aside, without the hologram function, my situation would have been quite dire.

Also, if I accidentally spoke, immediate pain and retribution would follow.

Thus, I aimed to obtain the Necklace of Confession to bypass the Curse of Silence, but I failed miserably.

Hong Yeon-hwa or Professor Atra…

I had a small desire to let the people around me hear my voice, but given the harsh reality of even lifting the Curse of Short-lived Beauty, I had resigned myself.

"I apologize for the modest gift; our family isn't that great, so this is all we can offer, hehe… Still, I believe it will be very helpful to you, Hayul!"

…So I thought.

It felt like my mind had frozen.

Slowly, I recalled the earlier situation.

I had calmed down Elia, who broke down crying, looking at where my left arm had been.

After composing her emotions for a while, she earnestly expressed her gratitude and suddenly handed something to me.

A simple silver necklace lay on her palm.

Its plain design wasn't particularly eye-catching, but it had a simple charm.

The feature, if any, was that it was adorned with a stone resembling quartz.

It was a necklace I remembered.

'The Necklace of Confession.'

My mouth hung open in a daze. I couldn't grasp the situation.

'Why is this here?'

I didn't know. The dungeon Echo of the Haunted had been raided decades ago.

'Why does Elia have this?'

I didn't know…

'Oh?'

At that moment, a memory from the past resurfaced in a corner of my mind.

The inscription on the stone at the site of the Echo of the Haunted.

———————

On a dark day, may this deed become a ray of light.

Georok Grass

Denis Bardon

Richard Carlyle

Artovan Maxwell

Trian Slade

_____

The culture of leaving traces of the members who raided the dungeon. Among the names inscribed on the stone.

There was a familiar name? A surname.

‘Trian Slade.’

Trian Slade.

Elia Slade.

The mention of “our family”…

These three things connected.

Elia’s family had raided the Echo of the Haunted. The Necklace of Confession obtained there was held by her family.

This resolved my question.

But there was still an unresolved question.

I struggled to operate the hologram projector.

[Why are you giving this to me?]

“Oh, sorry. I didn’t explain.”

Elia, wiping away her tears, explained the situation.

[Your sister? She happened to be in Shipnaha?]

“Yes… At that time, my heart dropped, and I almost went mad.”

Elia’s family… Her youngest sister had visited Shipnaha for an educational trip and got caught in the dungeon outbreak.

She said her sister was saved on-site with my help.

Having received grace, repaying it was the right thing to do.

While Elia and her family pondered how to repay me,

Her grandfather’s relic, an artifact perfect for my current situation, was given to Elia to bring to me.

Coincidentally, it was the Necklace of Confession.

I fiddled with my hand absentmindedly. The cool surface of the necklace assured me this wasn’t a dream.

‘Oh… ’

I hadn’t found a single artifact I sought, nor obtained the most important one, the Necklace of Confession.

I thought I had wasted my effort, gaining nothing but unnecessary hardship.

Though I saved many people, I still harbored some regret in my heart.

Now, that regret had lessened.

Because I didn’t run away but fought there, because I saved Elia’s sister,

The return of such gratitude through the necklace seemed to say that my actions were not wrong.

It might be an over-interpretation… but so what. Ultimately, it’s a matter of how I

perceive it.

Emotions welled up inside me.

My body moved according to the rising feelings.

“The function is as I explained, and if you don’t need it, you can sell it… Uh, Hayul?”

In a rush, I hugged Elia.

“Uh, uh?”

Elia, blinking in surprise, soon calmed down and gently patted my back.

This was a habit I had recently developed. Whenever emotions surged, Professor Atra would hug me tightly.

Throughout my time in the healing room, I was always in Professor Atra’s arms like this…

Like this… Uh…

‘Uh… ’

It was like that with Professor Atra. To prevent emotions from flying to strange places, she would always open her arms and tell me to come for a hug.

‘But who am I hugging now?’

My body stiffened.

The touch on my back, once familiar, now felt awkward…

…

Thunk- I buried my head into the table. The belated embarrassment spread throughout my body.

I had done something crazy. I thought I had regained my reason, but I guess some mental illness remained.

Professor Atra's words were all correct. Though my body recovered, my mind was still not fully present…

"It's okay, don't worry too much. You seemed like a little brother, it was cute."

Elia, sitting across from me and fiddling with her coffee cup with an awkward expression, spoke.

I appreciated her trying to comfort me by saying I seemed like a little brother, but the embarrassment didn't disappear.

But I couldn't keep my head buried in the table forever.

Somehow, I managed to gather myself and lifted my upper body.

Even while squirming in shame, I held onto the Necklace of Confession tightly.

'The Necklace of Confession.'

I knew its function. The knowledge from the original work and Elia's explanation confirmed it.

It reads the wearer's mind and expresses it through voice. Additionally, it has an engraving function that prevents others from using it once the wearer is alive.

Elia knew the function of the Necklace of Confession.

So, I was puzzled.

[Wouldn't it be better to give it to your sister?]

Deep down, I wanted to try it on immediately, but I remembered that Elia said her sister was also mute like me.

Also, among the people I met in Shipnaha, there was a girl who I guessed might be Elia's sister.

A girl who lingered near me, looking concerned when I sat in the park feeling dejected.

I remembered her clearly because she communicated through a hologram like me.

It made me tilt my head.

There's no need to give it to me; her sister could wear it.

"My grandfather wore it until recently, so she couldn't use it, and now my sister says she doesn't want to use it. She says she can manage without it, and she doesn't want to waste it on something she might use elsewhere later…"

'Oh.'

Hearing that made me hesitate to wear it. I thought about just returning it.

"Hayul, you really don't need to hesitate."

Seeing me hesitate, Elia grabbed my hand and spoke.

"That's the least we can do to repay someone who saved our family. So, don't feel bad about it? Not even a little."

Her words were full of sincerity.

Regardless, it was a gift beneficial only to me.

Considering how earnestly she said it, hesitating further might make Elia feel bad.

Nodding, Elia smiled warmly and let go of my hand.

I lifted the necklace to wear it.

'Uh… '

But thinking about it, I had never properly worn a necklace in my life.

'…Do I unhook it and put it around my neck? From behind? Or from the front to the back?'

"Shall I help you wear it?"

Seeing me fumble with the necklace, Elia, understanding my struggle, offered help.

I nodded cautiously, and Elia giggled as she approached.

She took the Necklace of Confession and stood behind me after unfastening the clasp.

“Alright, stay still…”

Her gentle voice whispered in my ear.

With careful movements, she tidied my hair momentarily, then wrapped her slender arms around my neck like a hug.

My body jolted as her arms brushed against the nape of my neck.

– Click

The necklace was put on in an instant. The sound of the clasp clicking felt unusually loud.

– Bzzz…

The necklace vibrated.

My body quivered as I felt the artifact linking with me.

It was the same sensation I had with the Wing Feathers of the Heavens. The difference was the lower density.

Unlike the Wing Feathers of the Heavens, which had good synergy with me, the Necklace of Confession didn’t seem to have any particular synergy.

The vibration ceased. Click, a sound of something locking inside my body was heard.

The engraving was complete. My heart pounded. A strange sense of unity was felt.

I looked up. Elia, who had taken a few steps back after putting on the necklace, was looking at me with a warm smile.

She was truly a grateful person.

She helped me at the gate terminal,

And provided a lot of assistance in Shio-ram for even small matters.

The Necklace of Confession I received now was also from her.

Though Elia and her family said it was a repayment for saving her, I also wanted to give similar gratitude back someday.

I decided to test the Necklace of Confession.

It reads the wearer's mind and expresses it through voice. So, I should just think to myself?

'Thank you.'

I said inwardly. The Necklace of Confession trembled slightly and consumed a bit of mana.

[Thank you]

The necklace emitted a voice. The tone was more monotone than the voice from my smartwatch.

'Oh.'

It really works. I was marveling at it when,

The necklace consumed mana again. This time, it was a bit more than before.

[Curious]

[Hungry]

[Want milk]

[Hurt]

[Scared]

[Sleepy]

[Hate studying]

[Conquer the tower]

[Jewel of Exorcism]

[Lifespan]

[Arm hurts]

[Cold]

[Life]

[Strangling]

[Like Elia]

[Love you]

‘?’

“Hmm?”

I stood there gaping, and Elia blinked in confusion.

[What’s this]

…

* * *

[Player Adjustment System: Affection Level]

Lee Hayul → Elia Slade

●●●●●●●○○○(67▷71/100)

[Affection] [Gratitude] [Chick]

[You did not meet the conditions to lift the “Curse of Silence”]

[You did not meet the conditions to lift the “Curse of Loneliness”]

CHAPTER 93
NECKLACE OF CONFESSION (2)

Elia blinked blankly.

She couldn't quite grasp the situation unfolding before her.

If this were a public space instead of a private room in a cafe, all eyes would be on them.

Across the table sat Lee Hayul. Being close in distance, she could see his face very clearly.

A face that was inexplicably more beautiful than a woman's.

Even the subtle trembling of his slender eyes was visible.

[What's this]

[Are you hungry?]

[But I don't want to eat]

[No, that's not it?]

A familiar voice reached her ears at that moment.

A hard, androgynous voice that could belong to either a man or a woman.

The sound was coming from the necklace around Lee Hayul's neck.

The Necklace of Confession.

An artifact her grandfather had acquired during his active days as a hero.

It was rated mid-low by the association.

Due to its function of expressing the mind, it received a relatively high rating.

However, it was useless in combat, and the built-in engraving function made it less desirable for heroes.

If it were a combat artifact, the engraving function might add points, but for a non-combat artifact like the Necklace of Confession, it was a drawback.

She knew its function, and she had heard from her grandfather how it worked.

Expression of the mind.

Here, 'mind' refers not to deep subconscious thoughts but rather shallow, surface-level consciousness.

It also expresses the nearest thought first, and the user can control the artifact's on/off function, so exposing inner thoughts is nearly impossible.

[Stop]

[Cease]

[Arm regeneration]

[Prosthetic artifact]

[Lake of Dreams]

[Wait]

[Does it hurt?]

That's how she understood it.

The scene before her seemed a bit different.

Lee Hayul, looking visibly bewildered, flailed his right arm around.

The necklace in his grasp clinked weakly as it swayed in the air.

It looked like a chick flapping its wings in an unsuccessful attempt to fly.

'Cute.'

The sight made her smile, but that smile quickly faded.

The empty sleeve on the other side was flapping forlornly, evoking a sense of pity.

Elia's eyes grew sorrowful.

Everyone knew about the incident at Shipnaha.

They knew about the person who fought to save lives amid disaster, sacrificing an arm.

And among those saved was Elia's precious family member.

This gave Elia a peculiar sense of connection.

On the day she stepped into Shio-ram for the first time, trying to suppress her pounding heart, she noticed someone who stood out in the crowd.

A petite figure with a small face.

A face that, despite its small size, had all the beautiful features in place.

For some reason, dark shadows were cast under his closed eyes, giving an overall impression of sadness.

She saw Lee Hayul, who looked troubled as if seeking help.

Moreover, judging by his attire, he was a fellow cadet of Shio-ram.

Elia offered help. She often performed such small acts of kindness.

But compared to usual, it seemed she had offered excessive help.

Why? She still didn't know the exact reason.

She just felt a peculiar attraction. At that moment, only Lee Hayul stood out to her.

In the crowd, he seemed like a different being, not quite human.

Feeling drawn to him, she had offered help.

That act of kindness seemed to return as saving her family member.

But the benefactor had lost an arm.

Body regeneration.

Elia, with her unique healing abilities, knew it wasn't entirely impossible.

Of course, it wasn't a typical amputation.

When another entity's malicious mana and unique ability invaded and torn the wound, the difficulty of regeneration was on another level.

But considering those supporting Lee Hayul, it would be possible. Surely, his arm could be regenerated.

That didn't make the injury any less severe.

Elia knew her duty as a person. Her family shared this sense of duty.

To treat the benefactor who saved her family with disrespect would be a matter grave enough to rouse her late grandfather with a club in hand.

[I'm hungry]

[Don't want to eat]

[No]

[The Curse of Silence- Eh-bebebebebe-]

Lost in thought for a moment.

The monotonous voice that had been ringing in her ears didn't stop. It ended with a comical sound.

It seemed something was wrong with Lee Hayul. Elia stood up abruptly.

She reached out both hands and gently clasped Lee Hayul's hands, which had been flailing aimlessly.

They shared each other's warmth.

Simultaneously, Lee Hayul's flailing stopped. The necklace, which had been continuously emitting sounds, also fell silent.

[Like]

[Warm]

[Soft]

…At least, it didn't mindlessly spill out his inner thoughts.

Elia had spent some time with Lee Hayul. They had encountered each other during daily life and major events like dungeon practice and tower entry schedules.

"Hayul? It's okay."

Speaking as gently and kindly as possible, Lee Hayul's trembling eyelids gradually settled.

Her hands didn't stop. She softly stroked Lee Hayul's hands, making sure the touch and warmth were conveyed.

Similarly, his body, which had been twitching, gradually calmed down.

The time spent was enough to get a slight understanding of his personality.

The person Elia perceived Lee Hayul to be was,

In a word, a child.

Not in a negative, immature sense, but in a positive, pure sense.

He liked people. But he was also scared of people, shrinking back and being wary

when strangers approached.

However, once a bit of familiarity was built and his guard lowered, he showed childlike traits.

He liked it when someone patted his head, and he enjoyed having his cheeks gently touched. He loved being hugged and having his back patted.

Even while pretending he wasn't, he would often hover nearby, subtly showing his willingness to help, and although he would be flustered when shown kindness, he remembered each act and paid it back later.

It wasn't just with Elia; he liked receiving affection from people he liked.

Everyone likes that to some extent, but with Lee Hayul, it felt more earnest.

He liked human affection and warmth.

As if he had never received it before and was now intoxicated by it.

"Breathe slowly in and out, that's right, good boy…"

So, calming Lee Hayul was relatively simple.

Just holding his hands, sharing warmth, and speaking softly.

Simply put, soothing him like a child.

Elia utilized her experience of taking care of her siblings to calm Lee Hayul.

The necklace also quieted down.

She continued her explanation.

At this moment, Lee Hayul was too flustered to control it. With a bit of focus, he could control the on/off function.

"Hayul? This necklace expresses every thought when you have too many. Try thinking of nothing important for a moment."

[Thought]

[Necklace]

[Elia? Pretty]

[No, what is this]

[Wrong thought]

[Not that she’s not pretty]

[No]

“Gasp. Th-thank you. You said you could sense everything with your observational ability, right?”

Though there were moments that made her blush, she managed to explain it somehow.

Perhaps because her hands were holding his, Lee Hayul maintained a calm demeanor throughout.

Seeing his cute appearance, she patted his head, noticing the blue fabric, spread out like a cape behind him, floating gently.

‘……’

As she continued explaining, Elia recalled the initial words the necklace had uttered.

Curious, hungry, want milk, sleepy, hate studying, necklace uncomfortable.

Some were trivial and cute words.

Hurt, lifespan, arm hurts, cold, life.

Many words clearly didn’t carry good feelings.

‘Strangulation (絞殺).’

There was a chilling word, too.

Strangulation.

To choke to death.

'Why would Hayul… '

Why would he think of such a word the moment he wore the necklace?

Elia couldn't know. Although she had grasped some of his nature, she didn't understand his exact circumstances.

'…… '

The certainty was.

That she didn't want Lee Hayul, who saved her precious family and evoked a peculiar resonance, to think of such chilling words about himself.

With that mindset, she helped Lee Hayul control the Necklace of Confession from the side.

Before long, Lee Hayul mastered the on/off function of the Necklace of Confession.

[Thank you]

[Like you]

[Pretty]

"Hmm…"

Elia felt a slight pang of regret.

* * *

– Crack!

"Ugh…! Ugh, urk…!"

A chilling sound echoed in a gray-walled room.

The unique sound of flesh tearing and bones breaking. Followed by the gasping, choking noises of someone struggling.

“Ugh, aaargh…”

His voice was hoarse to the point of cracking. Though he tried to scream, only blood bubbles and the sound of air escaping his throat emerged.

The man, writhing on the blood-soaked floor, twisted his body. His body rubbed against the floor soaking in blood.

– Crack!

“Urk…!”

The sound echoed again. The searing pain from his leg caused the man’s eyes to roll back.

His consciousness was fading. The pain was consuming his mind, bringing him closer to death.

In his dimming vision, he saw a leg flying towards him and golden eyes filled with hatred and murderous intent.

Thud! His head jerked back as if it would snap. His upper body flung back so hard it slammed into the ground.

– Boom!

Though it was a fierce collision accompanied by a loud noise, neither the man’s body nor the floor shattered.

The room itself was made of special material.

The man sprawled on the floor was a mid-high level superhuman.

“Is this the end?”

“No, there are three more left.”

“…Too many pests. Aren’t you managing them properly?”

“Even if you say that, it’s practically impossible to manage all of them…”

Atra, kicking the unconscious man on the floor a few more times, turned her head with a grimace.

She wiped her shoe against the floor.

However, there wasn’t a single speck of blood on her pants. The Qi she deliberately released had blocked all the dirty blood.

Atra had things to do over the weekend.

Matters related to her apprentice, Lee Hayul.

The dungeon outbreak itself was indeed a natural disaster.

But the outbreak at Shipnaha could have been prevented beforehand.

No, it was a man-made disaster that wouldn’t have occurred if not for someone’s filthy greed.

Because of such a disaster, Lee Hayul almost lost his life.

Thus, Atra’s weekend task was to hunt down and kill the pigs who, driven by filthy greed, failed to manage the situation.

She could have handed it over to the association.

Those running unauthorized farms to such an extent that it caused a chain of dungeon outbreaks were people who deserved to die.

But Atra took matters into her own hands. She wanted to block any potential escape routes herself and vent her boiling rage.

Moreover, some had already fled. Knowing they would have no chance of survival if caught, they had run in advance.

Even today, she had caught dozens of such people.

Among them, she personally beat up those who held significant shares.

Seeing her done venting, Maxwell signaled with his hand.

The staff waiting nearby retrieved the sprawled man.

They hadn't killed him yet. Though they could kill him without much issue, they planned to interrogate him just in case.

Atra glanced at the personnel dragging the man away.

"The number of people hasn't decreased, has it?"

"There are many reasons for that."

Maxwell shook his head as if tired.

"No matter how much they talk about peace, villains are still rampant. Plus, with the current state of the Forbidden Regions, the observation ratio has expanded to those areas. Capturing petty criminals is done by field agents."

With things like this, there's no surplus of manpower…

Maxwell muttered in frustration, looking exhausted.

Atra turned her head indifferently. Though she could sympathize, she had no desire to help.

Moreover, the current task was something Atra would help with if anything, not receive help.

"Let's go. We need to finish this by the weekend."

"Seriously… You're relentless."

"Shut up and move."

'I promised to return by the weekend, so I need to hurry.'

She had spent a bit too much time venting her stress.

Threatening Maxwell with a fist, Atra hurried out of the room.

CHAPTER 94
NECKLACE OF CONFESSION (3)

The Necklace of Confession hit me with an unexpected sucker punch. I never imagined it would dredge up my inner thoughts so thoroughly.

I was worried that the unsettling words mixed in might have created some aversion in Elia.

…I cautiously gauged her reaction, but fortunately, aside from her ordering warm milk for me, nothing significant happened.

As I sipped it, I had to struggle not to utter how it tasted bad.

After receiving Elia's help and practicing, I managed to gain some control over it.

But still, all I could do was switch it on and off.

Filtering out my inner thoughts was oddly difficult to control.

Elia's grandfather reportedly controlled it without any trouble, but what on earth was my problem…

'Tired… '

[I'm tired]

As I grumbled inwardly, the Necklace of Confession activated. The stern, androgynous voice made me frown deeply.

This was roughly how it went.

Feeling annoyed, I grabbed the necklace and shook it.

Honestly, it wasn't entirely a bad thing.

With the Curse of Silence sealing my voice, the Necklace of Confession allowed me to bypass the curse entirely.

Instead of an immensely difficult method like obtaining the Jewel of Exorcism or the Wish Power of the Tower, I bypassed the curse with just a mid-low grade artifact.

While it was certainly advantageous, not being able to properly handle it made it somewhat frustrating.

[Cadet Lee Hayul, authenticated.]

With the usual mechanical voice, the dormitory door opened.

Normally, I would use my smartwatch for authentication, but now I was using a hologram projector instead.

The hologram projector was a familiar tool to me.

It was essentially a smartphone with a built-in hologram function.

In this day and age, who doesn't use a smartwatch? But this product was sold for the rare few who didn't.

Taking off my shoes at the entrance, I trudged toward the living room.

I scanned the dormitory with my observational power.

The entrance I had just passed.

The living room and kitchen. Three rooms, a bathroom, a storage room, and a balcony.

Nothing had changed from what I remembered.

There were no half-knit scarves piled up in the corner of the living room, nor was there any noticeable mess.

Even the appliances showed little signs of use.

Truthfully, there was no reason for traces to be left.

Previously, I didn't spend much time in the dormitory.

In the morning, I would attend common lectures, and in the afternoon, I would be beaten up while training for my major.

After that, I'd either continue training or be too busy reviewing and preparing in the library.

Time would fly by, whether I liked it or not.

Even if I returned to the dormitory, it would be late at night, and I'd collapse immediately. Most of the time, I spent the early hours sitting in the library.

Hence, I hardly had any memory of using the dormitory facilities.

When I first arrived, I had carefully inspected everything, thinking I would live here for a few years, but looking at the situation, it seemed I wouldn't use it much in the remaining time either.

[Sigh]

[Disappointed]

[Hungry]

[Don't want to eat]

[Lonely]

'Ai… '

[Dammit]

When my mind wandered for a moment, the necklace acted up again. Silencing the chattering necklace, I plopped onto the sofa.

The plush feeling that hugged my hips was still the same.

'Hmm… '

Quite some time had passed. Most of the things I resolved and planned to do upon entering the dormitory were accomplished.

I had smoothly navigated minor schedules, including dungeon practice.

I had studied diligently. Although the material I missed while stuck in the healing room had piled up like mountains, I would have to tackle that while suffering…

I had trained well too. It might be self-praise, but I thought I had reached a mid-level position among the first years.

The exact result would be determined during the midterm evaluation.

I had obtained a lot of what I aimed for.

I achieved growth in the Tower of Growth.

I also obtained the most crucial artifact, the Egg of Origin. And I acquired the Wing Feathers of the Heavens, an artifact that would carry me through the mid-game.

'When will that wake up, I wonder.'

The Egg of Origin was nestled comfortably on one side of the sofa. Due to its size, it occupied quite a bit of space.

The Egg of Origin was a hidden piece with a lot of random elements, but it was undoubtedly a generous item.

Throughout its history, all the Eggs of Origin had yielded useful results.

Especially rare and valuable items that were hard to obtain even in the later rounds.

'Especially the 11th round'

11th round [Diamond Warrior]

Undoubtedly the most powerful round in terms of sheer combat prowess.

Invading and half-destroying Shio-ram, breaching the defenses of the Floating Island, which housed the Tower of Knowledge.

Raiding the three major families and other factions, and devastating the association's headquarters. Such was the 11th round.

It was also the round where a direct fight with the Tower Masters was possible.

I was lucky. Everything in the early stages went smoothly, allowing for maximum growth.

I made the right choices. I discarded benevolence and focused on elevating my combat prowess at the expense of sacrifice.

One of the smooth gears was the Egg of Origin.

In the 11th round, the Egg of Origin yielded the "Elixir of Growth."

Its effect was simple.

Expansion of stat potential and acceleration of growth speed.

Simple, but it was the best result at the time.

For the Diamond Warrior, who had chosen the path of extreme martial prowess, especially in the 11th round, there was nothing more suitable.

'I hope I get something similar… '

I had high expectations. Without hiding such expectations, I gently stroked the Egg of Origin.

Elixir of Growth? It wouldn't be bad even now, as I was exploring various fields with the aim to be a jack-of-all-trades.

It would also be great if I received a weapon or artifact that I could use until the end, like in the 8th round, or an artifact that added a unique ability, even if it was crude, like in the 3rd round.

Anything would be good. Considering the results from the original work, something helpful would surely appear.

'Hmm… '

I had achieved what I planned. I got the Egg of Origin, and I navigated through other schedules.

…Although there were several stumbles and close calls while obtaining the Necklace of Confession, I hadn't deviated too far yet.

I had completed the initial plans.

It was time to make new plans.

The goal remained similar to the beginning.

Lift the curses. The first priority was lifting the Curse of Short-lived Beauty, and if time allowed, lifting the Curse of Sensory Sealing. The Curse of Silence… probably couldn't be lifted.

I also added the thought of saving others if I could during the process.

The goal had slightly expanded.

In the end, combat prowess was crucial. Hence, the core of the plan should focus on the growth of my combat ability.

I recalled the memory of the original work.

During the occasional moments of respite in the healing room, I roughly sketched out the plan.

'Lake of Dreams.'

A hidden piece discovered in the 8th round… Though calling it a hidden piece was a bit odd. It was simply the location of a hidden dungeon.

However, the mere existence of that dungeon greatly boosted the player's combat stats.

It was a lake, as the name suggested. A small dungeon containing a beautiful lake, like something out of a grandiose dream.

The unique aspect was that it was absurdly difficult to find, and the mana within

boasted an incredible purity and density.

Just by sitting there and absorbing the mana, the magic stat would inflate significantly.

Thanks to this, from the 8th round onwards, I had enough mana to unleash non-stop attacks without worrying about running out.

There was also one more thing I was considering, but I was hesitant.

'Artifact, Proof of Guardian.'

A hidden piece discovered in the 9th round, which was spiraling down a disastrous path, and it was a top-tier artifact approaching the highest grade.

The reason this came to mind first was that the Proof of Guardian artifact was a prosthetic arm.

Not just any prosthetic arm, but a top-tier artifact with an innate ability boasting incredible defensive performance.

…That's what the status window told me. I had never used it personally.

Because the Proof of Guardian was a picky artifact that chose its owner.

During the 9th round, which was on the worst villainous path, I had only discovered it but hadn't had proper contact with it.

Hence the hesitation. Even if I managed to acquire it with difficulty, could I use it? It was said to consider the user's disposition, and I had a feeling I'd be rejected.

Also, if I found it after my arm was already restored, I would have to cut off my functional arm to use it.

A cowardly thought, but no sane person would consider cutting off their arm…

I had a few more candidates in mind, but I hadn't fully planned them out yet.

[Sigh]

A sigh escaped me. The necklace, which seemed to occasionally read my thoughts and make a remark, was annoying.

I'd have to spend some time mastering its control.

Bypassing the Curse of Silence was good, but having my inner thoughts exposed was like another curse of its own.

– Ding!

The alarm sound rang at that moment.

I squinted my eyes.

Wondering if it was some phantom alarm, I checked the hologram projector.

Fortunately? Unfortunately? It was a normal email alarm. A highlighted chat room amidst the flood of messages.

[Class 121 Ipchun Chatroom (103)]

▸Liana Velus: [Notice!] Next week's common lecture will be 『Understanding Spirits 』! No materials are needed! Please gather at the Second Nature Park on time! (๑>ᴗ<)و (Today at 15:03)

The message was sent by Professor Liana.

I heard she visited a few times while I was unconscious, but I hadn't met her since waking up.

I thought about visiting her today, but didn't want to bother her on the weekend.

Moreover, the message indicated I would be seeing her throughout next week.

Next week's common lectures were fully scheduled with Professor Liana's lectures.

* * *

[Player Adjustment System: Affection Level]

Lee Hayul → Liana Velus

●●●●●●○○○○(65/100)

[Affection] [Gratitude] [Kind Adult]

[You did not meet the conditions to lift the “Curse of Silence”]

[You did not meet the conditions to lift the “Curse of Loneliness”]

CHAPTER 95
DO YOU WANT TO TOUCH IT?

The weekend passed in the blink of an eye. I hadn't even caught up to half of my reading, and time flowed like water.

While I was somewhat anxious about the practical exams in the midterms, thinking about it now, the written exams were equally daunting.

The fact that the written exam weight was low didn't provide any comfort.

I was already weak in written exams, and now that I had fallen behind this much… the future looked grim.

I sighed deeply as I opened the wardrobe.

I took out my cadet uniform for the first time in a while.

'Hmm… '

I examined my body with the power of observation. Besides the droopy left sleeve, there was nothing unusual.

Wearing the cleanly designed cadet uniform, devoid of unnecessary decorations, felt oddly strange.

It felt like it had been a long time, yet also like just yesterday… an ambiguous feeling.

When heading to Shipnaha, I wore one of my few casual clothes, and for the few weeks in the healing room, I wore patient clothes.

Time had indeed been long, but most of it had been urgent and chaotic, making my sense of time feel sluggish.

Simultaneously, the tension that had been tightly wound was gradually loosening.

Ever since leaving Shio-ram, I had been on edge.

The traumatic experience right after leaving Shio-ram in the 7th round contributed to my anxiety.

In Shipnaha, I indeed faced a life-threatening situation. I nearly ended up in a grave there.

In the healing room… I felt strangely uneasy and irritable whenever Professor Atra wasn't around. I just felt repulsed by the healing room itself.

My nose twitched involuntarily, and I felt nauseous. I simply hated being there.

[Repulsion]

[Hate]

[Smell of alcohol?]

It triggered unpleasant memories.

As I dwelled on these thoughts, the necklace started spouting my thoughts without restraint. I hadn't tried to control it, and it didn't fail to live up to its reputation.

But didn't it say it wouldn't reveal deep-seated thoughts? The smell of alcohol… wouldn't my trauma be part of my deep-seated consciousness?

'Tsk.'

Bad memories surfaced for no reason. After straightening my clothes, I glanced at my face.

…Even from my own perspective, I didn't look good. The shadows under my eyes seemed darker, and my face overall looked worn out.

It was because I hadn't been sleeping well.

Even lying in bed, I couldn't fall asleep. More precisely, I felt sleepy but couldn't fall asleep.

My consciousness just wouldn't settle. An inexplicable sense of unease kept me awake.

I had similar symptoms at the beginning of the semester. The world around me had changed, and with everything being uncertain, I couldn't sleep well.

So, I maintained the habit of exhausting myself to the point of passing out… but now, even though my mind was tired, I couldn't pass out.

And I was too afraid of Professor Atra's stern warnings to physically exhaust myself…

I didn't know why I couldn't sleep even though there was no place safer than here.

I just felt empty and…

[Lonely]

[Professor]

[Hug me, e-bebebebeb]

'Oh, damn it.'

Startled by the unabashed words, I gripped the necklace tightly.

A shameless and indecent comment almost slipped out.

Even thinking such things privately made me want to die of embarrassment, and if someone else heard it… I wouldn't have the courage to lift my head and face the world…

My fingers trembled. An impulse rose in my mind.

[Destroy]

…I suppressed the impulse. Destroying the gift given by Elia and her family would make me a wretch.

I brushed the feathers of the Wings of Heaven draped over my shoulder and left the dormitory.

Shio-ram… I couldn't even be bothered to count how many weeks it had been.

Two weeks remained until the midterm evaluations.

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As announced in the group chat, most of this week's common lectures were packed with spirit-related lectures taught by Professor Liana.

Hence, instead of heading to Ipchun Hall in the morning, I went to the pre-announced Second Nature Park.

It didn't take long to arrive.

After leaving the dormitory and taking an autonomous bus, I was dropped off at the entrance of the Second Nature Park.

Despite being called a park, it wasn't a facility for relaxation.

The facility was a strict training ground set up for the cadets.

And as the name "Nature" suggests, although it was a facility, it preserved a lot of natural scenery.

'Oh… '

After getting off the bus, I expanded my observation range significantly. This time, it surpassed my previous maximum range. Fortunately, it didn't strain my head much.

[Headache]

[Nosebleed]

[Retinal hemorrhage]

Just the usual level of headache.

‘This is working well.’

I practiced using the power during the weekend.

Observation and space. Powers I didn’t know why they were with me.

Although I had built some proficiency with spatial perception, separating what I had forcibly merged caused some stuttering.

The spatial power was particularly challenging.

Maybe because I had been using spatial perception as a form of observation rather than perceiving space itself.

Fortunately, the observation power had less stuttering. Even just using it similarly to spatial perception had that effect.

‘…Observation power’

The power granted by the Tower of Observation.

The Tower of Observation is evaluated as one of the pillars supporting the current world order.

Thanks to the forewarning of disasters like the Forbidden Regions, dungeons, and villains, many lives are saved even now.

Such forewarning is possible because of the Observatory established by the Tower Master of the Tower of Observation.

24/7, 365 days. Without a moment’s gap, the Tower of Observation surveys the entire world.

Of course, due to practical limitations, most of the observation is focused on the Forbidden Regions and potential dungeon outbreaks.

Thus, it couldn’t actively address domestic crimes.

The help it provided was indirect, like supporting magical tools with a small portion of the observation power.

However, even if indirect, without it, the arrest rate for villains committing crimes using unique abilities would be abysmal.

'Hmm… '

The entire park's appearance came into view within my observation range.

There were few artificial traces. There was little evidence of human touch, like pruning.

The only trace was a path leading to the lake.

At the center of the nature park was a large lake, its water exceptionally clear, without the slightest murkiness.

Although it wasn't dawn, it was still early enough that a faint mist lingered, creating a unique atmosphere.

The surroundings were also clean, making it not feel awkward. It seemed like I could roll around, and there wouldn't be a speck of dust.

At the entrance was a path paved with tightly packed stones. It was one of the few visible artificial traces.

Walking along the path leading to the lake, the presence of people grew closer.

Despite leaving early, there were those who arrived before me.

They were my fellow Ipchun class cadets. Professor Liana had not yet arrived.

As I drew closer, a few cadets who sensed my presence turned their heads.

Their eyes widened. They tapped the cadets beside them, who also turned their heads and similarly widened their eyes.

Gazes fixed on me. Different from before… quite intense gazes made me shiver slightly.

"……"

"……"

I gulped.

The feeling was as if they were looking at something incredible… yet also at a pitiable person…

Those awkward gazes were hard to bear.

Perhaps the only fortunate thing was that no one approached to talk.

Hong Yeon-hwa and Elia had not arrived yet either.

Neither had Atila, Aidan, nor Nam Yeon-jung… those with whom I had some familiarity.

In short, there was no one to talk to.

I glanced around cautiously and found a spot to sit a bit away from the others.

The grass was lush, so despite being on the ground, it wasn't as hard as expected. It wasn't too cold either, so sitting wasn't uncomfortable.

I thought of spreading out the Wings of Heaven and lying down, but I remained seated, conscious of the gazes fixated on me.

– Whoosh

A breeze swept past my body. The wind was quite chilly.

Had I been sitting there for a while?

As more cadets arrived, a chilly presence approached me quietly.

"Hayul, you came out early?"

A familiar voice and presence. More than anything, the cold aura that couldn't be mistaken.

"It's been a while since your hospital visit!"

Contrary to the chilly aura, Baek Ahrin greeted me with a bright smile.

Her warm, soft smile lightened the surroundings, but knowing the original story, I remained on guard.

'But… '

I hesitated and bowed my head in return.

I also remembered Baek Ahrin's considerate actions.

Even during common lecture hours, she had always been considerate. She had greatly helped me in the Tower of Growth. After that, I knew she had shown various kinds of consideration.

Thus, I didn't feel an absolute aversion toward her.

She had never harmed me, and had always shown care, so rejecting her without reason seemed wrong.

However, I couldn't trust her unconditionally. If the original story was accurate, who knew when I might be betrayed.

Although I had some theories about her background, nothing was certain.

So, I remained cautious. I was unusually mindful of controlling the necklace.

If my mouth… or the necklace slipped up here, it would be a catastrophe like the 11th round.

[Hello]

[Baek Ahrin]

[Nice to meet you]

The Necklace of Confession activated. The thoughts I murmured inside were expressed in a stern voice.

"Oh."

Baek Ahrin's eyes widened. Her gaze, full of wonder, landed on the necklace around my neck.

A glimmer of interest appeared in her eyes. She seemed to realize that it wasn't just any magical tool but an artifact.

"Is it an artifact? Does it express thoughts as sound?"

[Yes]

"Ah. This type is rare…"

I nodded inwardly at her words.

The Necklace of Confession had a peculiar function among various artifacts.

Peculiar, but not superior.

In the original work, the Necklace of Confession wasn't used much.

Even using it for interrogation was tricky since the wearer could control it, filtering out information, and it could overload and break after changing owners a few times due to its engraving function.

In such cases, using magic to pry open someone's mind was faster and more reliable.

'But is Baek Ahrin really that intrigued?'

Being from the Changhae family, she must have seen all sorts of artifacts.

Considering the top-tier artifacts the family head would wear and those activated in the main house, the Necklace of Confession should seem ordinary.

[Thank you for visiting me. The gift… I enjoyed it]

Baek Ahrin had brought high-quality candy as a hospital visit gift. After seeing Hong Yeon-hwa giving me candy, she also chose candy.

Of course, while both were candy, they were different types.

Hong Yeon-hwa mostly gave me sweet, apple-flavored fruit candy, while Baek Ahrin gave me traditional sweets called okchundang, made by mixing rice flour and taffy.

They looked colorful and delicious.

At least on the outside.

“I’m glad you enjoyed it! If you want more, just let me know anytime.”

As I pondered that.

Baek Ahrin, who had exchanged a few words with me and the necklace, sat down beside me.

She pulled her outstretched legs together and hugged them with her arms.

Baek Ahrin continued the conversation as if everything was fine.

‘Hmm… ’

It was a normal, common posture.

– Squeeze…

But now, such a normal posture felt quite uncomfortable.

Because as she pulled her legs to her chest, her chest naturally got squeezed.

I didn’t particularly pay attention to it… but Baek Ahrin’s chest was incredibly large.

Since Baek Ahrin was quite tall, her proportions seemed fine, but even to someone like me with no related knowledge, her chest was exceptionally large.

As her chest got squeezed, I felt suffocated.

It was just a thought. I tried to avoid such thoughts as much as possible.

Ever since acquiring what I thought was the spatial perception power, I had been extra cautious.

Since manifesting Gop-hwa through unconscious synchronization, strange impulses kept arising, making me even more careful.

The observation power had an outstanding ability to gather information.

Thus, peculiar information occasionally seeped in.

I especially paid attention not to misuse that information.

I did the same this time. I controlled the observation power. I disregarded unnecessary information.

A bit of information came in, and I promptly dismissed any improper thoughts that arose from it.

As always.

[Huge chest]

Except this time, as I focused on the observation power, my control over the necklace slipped slightly.

[Huh?]

“Hmm?”

‘What?’

What did I just say?

No, what did the necklace just spout?

My brain froze. The monotonous voice that echoed in my ears wasn’t properly processed.

But one thing was certain, it was an extremely rude and impolite comment.

After a fleeting moment, my mouth fell open. The color drained from my face.

Baek Ahrin blinked.

She blinked a few times, her eyes widened as if she had heard something unexpected.

And then.

– Hehe

Her eyes curved into crescent moons, and the corners of her mouth lifted. A playful smile spread across her face. It was as if she had found something to tease.

“My chest is quite big. Why? Do you want to touch it?”

She laughed softly while poking my cheek.

Frozen stiff, I flinched and frantically shook my head.

CHAPTER 96
SPIRITS (1)

Lately, I think I've become arrogant.

I pretended not to be, but being subtly praised as if I were someone great might have spoiled me.

I had heard and experienced that controlling the Necklace of Confession could be a bit difficult.

But once I could switch it on and off, I didn't pay much attention to it.

Filtering wasn't entirely impossible, and I thought I could just cut the connection if I were about to say something I shouldn't.

It didn't work out as well as I thought.

This necklace… it would expose fleeting, inappropriate thoughts to the world.

[Sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry]

"Oh, you don't have to apologize so much. It's okay, lift your head."

I kept bowing my head as if I was about to bury it in the ground. Next to me, the hologram displayed my apology.

The moment the necklace blurted out that embarrassing word, I belatedly stopped the Necklace of Confession.

But plugging the hole couldn't gather the spilled water.

Honestly, I was terrified that an ice spear from Baek Ahrin might fly at me. If not that, I thought cold stares and emotions would be directed at me.

"Really, it's okay, you don't have to do that. You had no bad intentions, right?"

[I'm sorry…]

But Baek Ahrin didn't seem particularly offended.

Instead, she comforted me as if she understood everything.

I was a bit moved by that. I was so grateful and sorry that she let such a rude comment pass and considered me.

"Babies naturally look for breasts. So you don't need to be embarrassed."

[I'm sorry… what?]

'?'

As I was diligently typing out the apology to show my sincerity, I heard something strange.

The Necklace of Confession was off… had my ears gone bad?

A question mark floated above my head.

Baek Ahrin chuckled at my reaction.

[What do you mean by baby?]

"The baby you're thinking of, Hayul. Not 'talk' but a crying baby."

'?'

Another question mark added itself. I awkwardly interpreted Baek Ahrin's words.

She called me a baby.

A baby…

A child?

Is she saying I'm a nursing infant?

Looking at me?

I was dumbfounded.

A sense of rebellion slowly reared its head from within.

Along with the embarrassment and shame of being called that at my age.

No matter how short I was, I wasn't small enough to be treated like that.

In my previous world, though my birth registration was shaky, I was an adult, and I was also an adult in this world's status.

Obviously, I wasn't of the physique or age to be called a baby, nor was there any reason to be.

"What could you do if a baby looks for breasts?"

'……'

"Right?"

But recalling the mistake I had just made, my resistance naturally subsided.

I had committed a wrong, so rebelling against her teasing was laughable.

Baek Ahrin kept teasing me with a mischievous smile.

Sometimes, her teasing emphasized her chest, making me want to flee… but I couldn't run away because of the guilt.

Caught in the endless cycle of teasing, more cadets started to arrive.

They didn't intrude between me and Baek Ahrin, instead keeping their distance and watching like it was none of their business.

I saw some familiar faces.

Atila and Aidan, sitting a bit further away, came into my observation.

Atila still had a sharp demeanor, and Aidan wore a blank expression.

While I felt a sense of welcome from seeing familiar faces after a long time, I was even more desperate for help.

'Help… '

As if sensing my desperate emotions, Atila, who had been scribbling on her smartwatch, turned her head. Although our eyes didn't meet, she was definitely looking this way.

She flinched. Her eyes trembled slightly as she alternated between looking at Baek Ahrin and me, then she turned away.

'?'

Next to her, Aidan blinked, glanced around, and then followed Atila's lead and turned away.

'?'

Their blatant rejection hit me with a thud.

I thought we had some familiarity, but I didn't expect to be ignored so bluntly.

While I was trembling in shock,

A figure walking towards the park entered my observation range.

Wearing a red jumper carelessly over her cadet uniform and with a disinterested expression…

It was Hong Yeon-hwa.

'……!'

My complexion brightened instantly.

Though Atila and Aidan, whom I thought were familiar, ignored me, I believed Hong Yeon-hwa wouldn't do the same.

“Oh.”

As if to reward my faith, Hong Yeon-hwa’s face brightened as she chewed on something and looked at me.

Her steps quickened, and she soon reached me. She naturally reached out and patted my head.

The touch on my hair made the corners of my mouth twitch.

“Did you recover well? No aftereffects?”

– Shake, shake

“Really? Not lying? Looking at your face, it doesn’t seem so.”

Her hand slid from my hair to my cheek.

I pressed my cheek into her grasping hand. The more area she touched, the more satisfaction I felt.

As I enjoyed the satisfying sensation, her slender fingers traced the shadows under my eyes.

Though she squinted as if my answer was unconvincing, she looked somber when she saw my left arm’s missing spot.

I didn’t want to see Hong Yeon-hwa make that expression.

Just as I was about to divert her attention, her gaze had already shifted.

Her gaze touched my neck.

“Huh?”

Her eyes blinked. A peculiar emotion flickered in her eyes as she extended her slender fingers to tap the Necklace of Confession.

“What’s this?”

Her voice was calm as she asked. Yet, it felt off. As if she disliked it for some reason.

“Who gave it to you?”

Does she dislike the necklace? The design seemed fine to me.

“It’s an artifact. It expresses thoughts; Elia gave it to him.”

“Elia? An artifact?”

“Yes. But since he can’t control it yet, it’s turned off.”

Baek Ahrin, who was watching us from behind with a curious look, explained on my behalf.

She mentioned the function of the Necklace of Confession and that it was currently off due to a recent incident.

Thankfully, when explaining the recent incident, Baek Ahrin noticed my desperate signals and edited her explanation with a smile.

Hong Yeon-hwa listened to the explanation and glanced down at the necklace again.

“……”

Her gaze lifted. A subtle look pierced through me.

Though it didn’t send chills, it felt odd.

I expressed my confusion by tilting my head, but Hong Yeon-hwa just patted my cheek, saying it was nothing.

If the Necklace of Confession had been on, what would it have said?

I didn’t want to think about it.

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“Is everyone here?”

Liana arrived shortly after.

There were about ten minutes left until the scheduled time.

Using my observational power, I counted the cadets and confirmed no one was missing.

Liana stood with her back to the lake, doing a final check, while the cadets sat around her in a semicircle.

I was among them. Sitting at the far end of the semicircle, I rummaged through my pockets.

– Rip

I tore open a candy wrapper I had stashed in my pocket. I took out the candy and popped it into my mouth.

Though it didn’t taste good, it was a gift, and I couldn’t just store it away.

Moreover, while not malnourished, I had been advised to keep eating periodically, so I brought along nutrition bars and candy.

“……”

‘?’

As I did so, a gaze landed on me. Curious, I observed and found Hong Yeon-hwa watching my lips… specifically the candy sticking out since it couldn’t fit entirely in my mouth.

A colorful candy.

It was the okchundang Baek Ahrin had given me.

Her gaze on it was similar to the one she had given the necklace earlier.

"…No, it's okay."

Thinking she might want some, I offered extra okchundang, but Hong Yeon-hwa just shook her head.

– Clap!

Just then, Liana finished her final check and clapped her hands.

The crisp sound of the clap spread among the cadets.

"Since everyone is here and it's time, let's start simply!"

I readjusted my posture.

I was already behind on my studies. If I fell behind on this too, my midterm grades would be in the basement.

Gathering everyone's attention, Liana began her explanation with her back to the lake.

Today's lecture was 『Understanding Spirits』.

"First, let's define what a spirit is. It's simple! We call an entity with weak self-awareness and individuality that acts according to nature's will a spirit. And the technique to contract and control spirits is called Spirit Magic."

It was the same kind of spirit commonly seen in fantasy genres in my previous world.

Basically, there were spirits of basic elements like water, fire, wind, lightning, and earth.

Besides these, there were special attribute spirits, but most spirits belonged to the basic elements.

"I know you've all heard the theory, but let me ask, what is the advantage of Spirit Magic?"

"The output and quantity from controlling multiple spirits."

“Yes, as Cadet Isabel said, the primary advantage of Spirit Magic is quantity.”

Liana smiled at a female cadet’s response.

“Spirit Magic doesn’t deal with a single spirit. If you have affinity, capacity, and the mana to handle them, you can contract as many spirits as you want.”

Of course, it depends on one’s aptitude, but most spirit magicians contract and control dozens of spirits.

It’s rare for dozens of spirits to belong to a single attribute.

Although there’s a difference in the strength of spirits, spirit magicians can easily exploit weaknesses by leading spirits of different attributes.

They can also command spirits to fight individually. Additionally, spirits inherently possess immortality, allowing them to be sent into battle multiple times.

Moreover, spirit magicians themselves aren’t entirely inactive. They can fight using body strength, Qi, magic, or other unique abilities.

“I’m a fairly accomplished spirit magician and a superhuman who became an advanced hero in large-scale battles.”

Combat heroes are performance-oriented. Regardless of their current skills, they accumulate achievements and use them as a basis for their grade.

Combat heroes are categorized into three main types.

Anti-personnel. The ability to fight human-sized enemies.

Anti-monster. The ability to hunt monsters.

And anti-army.

The criteria for anti-army heroes are unique.

Can they significantly influence the battlefield alone?

It’s a stricter criterion than anti-personnel or anti-monster.

Therefore, most heroes raise their grades through anti-personnel or anti-monster achievements.

Professor Liana was a hero who had risen to the top tier in the anti-army category.

Just before retiring, she single-handedly blocked a monster uprising on the front lines.

“Though it’s true for anything, Spirit Magic especially requires innate talent.”

Liana’s gentle voice filled the park.

“Why? Because other races need a contract process to handle spirits, and without affinity, they can’t even attempt it.”

Spirits are difficult to use.

Few people even qualify to use them.

Those who qualify have the unique ability to have spirit affinity.

In the first-year cadets of Shio-ram, who gathered talent from around the world, only a few had learned Spirit Magic.

Spirit Magic is a rare talent.

“So, what’s today’s learning objective? It’s to check your affinity! You never know, maybe there’s a hidden affinity you missed when you enrolled!”

With a bright smile, Liana beckoned with her finger.

Thud! One of the nearby boxes rattled, and a colorful orb popped out and flew into Liana’s hand.

Liana flinched as she grabbed it.

“…?”

Liana stared at the orb in her hand.

Externally, the orb emitted a faint, multicolored aura.

It looked similar to the orb she used to teach me about mana, except for the color.

The difference was that it was smaller, and instead of containing mana, it had mysterious auras floating inside…

And it was slightly trembling.

'Are those auras spirits?'

I had been curious from the moment I noticed them.

I kept feeling like those auras were bumping against the walls, trying to get out, and they seemed to be heading in my direction.

"…Even without affinity, there's no issue with today's lecture. 『Understanding Spirits』 isn't about controlling spirits but understanding the concept and learning how to deal with them."

Liana glanced at the cadets listening attentively.

Then she looked down at the orb again and raised her head to look in one direction.

"But…"

Her gaze lingered for a long time.

"Having affinity would be nice, wouldn't it?"

She was staring in my direction…

No, she was staring directly at me.

* * *

[Player Adjustment System: Affection Level]

Lee Hayul → Baek Ahrin

●●●●○○○○○○(51▷53/100)

[Affection] [Curiosity] [Confusion] [Guilt]

…

Lee Hayul → Atila Blerro

●●●●○○○○○○(49▷48/100)

[Acquaintance] [Disappointment]

…

Lee Hayul → Aidan Reynolds

●●●●○○○○○○(45▷44/100)

[Acquaintance] [Fool] [Disappointment]

[You did not meet the conditions to lift the “Curse of Silence”]

[You did not meet the conditions to lift the “Curse of Loneliness”]

CHAPTER 97
SPIRITS (2)

The Nature Park is a space brimming with mana.

After all, this facility itself was created for mana training.

Wherever I turned my gaze, the scenery's beauty was secondary to the rich mana that I felt through the power of observation.

The density of mana was high. Though extremely faint, simply breathing was enough to absorb some amount of mana.

Not only was the density high, but the purity was also exceptional.

In such a park, the Ipchun class cadets were seated in various spots.

The common feature was the fist-sized crystal orbs in their hands.

The crystal orbs were transparent, with five-colored auras floating inside as if they were mixed with watercolor.

The crystal orbs used in the previous mana introduction were magical tools that aided in 'mana resonance'.

These magical tools helped confirm spirit affinity and awaken latent affinity.

The cadets were rolling the crystal orbs around in their hands, focusing intently.

Some cadets were frowning as they fiddled with the orbs, while others held the orbs with a serene mindset as if they had attained enlightenment.

Some found it easier to focus alone and positioned themselves away from others, while close friends gathered in small groups to concentrate.

Each cadet was focusing in their own way.

The first session of the ‘Understanding Spirits’ lecture was entirely dedicated to confirming affinities.

I was also holding a crystal orb.

Normally, I would have been focusing alone or sticking close to Hong Yeon-hwa or Elia.

“It might seem like a waste of time, but it’s good to periodically check your potential.”

But today was different.

A voice from right in front of me brought me back to reality.

A person who, even in this mana-rich space, carried an overwhelming amount of internal mana.

If I closed my eyes and only sensed mana, Professor Liana felt like a massive lump of mana.

She continued explaining with a gentle smile.

“Though innate talent is important, it’s not unheard of for it to blossom later in life.”

[Is it common for talents to blossom later?]

“No. It’s not common. Such cases are rare. Usually, it manifests when you awaken mana.”

Wasn’t the average age for becoming a superhuman around 3 to 5 years old?

Generally, that’s when people are divided into humans and superhumans, and among superhumans, those with unique abilities and those without.

“Still, it’s not unheard of. Professor Atra also didn’t have a unique ability initially, and there are cases of exceptionally late awakenings, like someone we know.”

I knew who she was referring to.

My case of awakening ten years later than usual was exceptional.

It might be unusual and special, but I wasn't sure if it made me superior.

Others had been training since childhood. I was just starting to learn because of my late awakening.

I couldn't see the benefits, and the losses seemed significant.

Thinking that, I wriggled my fingers.

It didn't go as I wanted.

Partly because I was holding the crystal orb with one hand, and partly because Professor Liana's hand was supporting mine.

My one remaining arm was restricted. As a result, I had no choice but to turn on the Necklace of Confession for effective communication.

Thanks to that, I was extremely tense, on high alert to prevent a repeat of the previous disaster.

I was prepared to cut off the connection the moment the Necklace of Confession tried to spout anything bizarre again.

"It's been a while since we had a conversation like this."

[You even visited me at the hospital, didn't you?]

"I just saw your sleeping face then. When you regained consciousness, I was too busy to visit."

A soft sensation was transmitted to the back of my hand. Occasionally, her fingers would poke my hand, causing a ticklish feeling.

According to Professor Liana, it was to check my concentration.

"The atmosphere now is similar to back then, too."

Explaining with a smile, Professor Liana suddenly seemed to recall something and spoke up.

Her gaze swept the surrounding scenery. I also observed the surroundings with the power of observation.

The slanting sun in the sky, the grass glittering under the rays.

The branches and leaves swaying in the occasional breeze.

The lake creating a dreamy atmosphere even under the thin layer of mist.

It was similar to the park where she had helped me with the mana introduction at the beginning of the semester.

Although the presence or absence of artificial structures like walking paths and benches differed, the overall atmosphere was similar.

And the gazes of Hong Yeon-hwa and others watching us were another difference.

Back then, it was just me and Professor Liana.

“How is it? Can you feel the energy well?”

Professor Liana tapped the back of my hand.

I redirected my attention to the crystal orb in response to her question.

– Thud

The crystal orb in my grasp shook. I had lost count of how many times it had done that.

The energies inside the orb were tapping against one wall.

As if wanting to escape, the energies tapping against the wall were directed towards me.

“Just as expected… you have an affinity.”

Professor Liana, looking at the trembling orb, spoke in amazement.

While others were holding the orbs and checking their affinity, I was already

confirmed to have an affinity, so Professor Liana was teaching me directly.

Naturally, we were sitting face to face in a one-on-one lesson.

Her fingers tapped the orb.

“Can you see… no, feel it? The energies inside the orb.”

[Yes]

[Five different energies]

Red, light green, blue, yellow, and brown.

The five-colored energies were tapping against the wall of the orb.

“These are the energies of the basic elemental spirits. They react to the affinity of the person in contact with them… and you have an affinity with all five.”

Each representing fire, wind, water, lightning, and earth elements.

Most elemental abilities, despite minor differences, fall under these five elements.

“Now that we’ve confirmed your affinity, let me explain the contract process briefly.”

Professor Liana retrieved the orb from my hand and wiggled her fingers.

“Lower spirits have very faint self-awareness. They’re almost like cogs operating on basic instincts suited to their elements.”

I was familiar with this knowledge.

Unless the spirit was of a high rank, lower spirits had little to no self-awareness.

They simply preferred mana-rich locations and occasionally performed tasks like nature restoration, driven by instinct.

“Spirit magicians contract with such spirits to control them. Contracting with a lower spirit is quite simple; it’s a matter of the magician wanting the contract.”

In spirit magic, a contract establishes control over the spirit.

Uncontracted spirits cannot be controlled.

Just as I cannot use mana that isn't mine, I cannot control spirits that aren't mine.

Therefore, spirit magicians contract with spirits in numbers they can handle, based on their affinity, capacity, and mana level.

Professor Liana, with her exceptional affinity, capacity, and mana level, controlled an absurd number of spirits.

'I wonder how I'll do?'

Affinity for spirits…

I had a suspicion that I might have it.

Given my unique ability to be versatile, I figured I might have enough affinity to at least dabble with spirits.

But given Professor Liana's explanation, my affinity for spirits seemed exceptionally high.

"Let's get started then!"

Professor Liana drew her finger through the air. Mana flickered at her fingertip, leaving a trace in the air.

And then, a door opened.

'?'

A door? Split open? Torn? Whatever you call it, it didn't matter.

It wasn't the power of observation.

It was the power of space, which hadn't seen much use lately, recognizing the space opening in midair.

Following Professor Liana's gesture, the line in the air opened horizontally.

Mana spilled out from the opened space.

Colorful auras representing various elements.

It was the same energy I felt from the crystal orb and nature.

But its quality and quantity were overwhelming.

I sensed presences. Should I call them presences? I wasn't sure, but countless entities were definitely sensed in that space.

'Spirits.'

I instinctively realized.

The presences in that space were spirits. Each and every one of those numerous entities was a spirit of varying ranks.

– Pop!

At that moment, one of the countless spirits slipped out.

The instant that greenish light emerged, the space split open on both sides, sealed shut again.

The green light floated above Professor Liana's palm.

My sensitive skin could faintly feel the gentle breeze the spirit created.

"This is a spirit of wind."

It was also perceivable through mana affinity and the power of observation.

I was sure the green light could be seen with the naked eye, too.

"This spirit is contracted with me. In other words, it's controlled by me, and unless I sever the contract, no one else can control it."

After briefly examining the spirit, Professor Liana continued explaining.

“I’ll sever the contract with this spirit shortly. When I do, you’ll need to contract with it. It might be difficult at first, but we have plenty of time, so take it slow.”

Professor Liana looked at me quietly, as if giving me time to sense the spirit.

It was the same approach as during the mana introduction.

I nodded with a curious expression.

[It’s amazing]

Experiencing the control of a spirit firsthand, I couldn’t help but be amazed.

[It’s incredible]

I had handled unique abilities and magic before, but experiencing spirit control was fascinating.

And.

[Is it familiar?]

It strangely felt familiar.

‘What is this?’

It was an inexplicable sensation. Was it the wonder of experiencing something for the first time that brought about a sense of familiarity?

‘Hmm… ’

I observed the spirit using the power of observation.

I used the power more intricately, not just recognizing its external appearance but also observing its internal structure.

My head throbbed. It was a burdensome feeling, but I didn’t suddenly collapse in a spray of blood.

Partly because I had grown, and partly because I limited the range to a small spirit.

‘Is this the contract?’

Then I noticed a connection to the spirit.

It felt like a thread, leading to Professor Liana.

In other words, the spirit was contracted with Professor Liana.

A contracted spirit cannot be contracted by another spirit magician.

Uncontracted spirits cannot be controlled by others.

Professor Liana had explained it. That connection was the passage linking the magician and the spirit.

Through that passage, the magician’s will and mana were conveyed.

In other words, I couldn’t convey my will to that spirit.

‘Can’t I control it?’

I tilted my head.

I had no particular thoughts. I just felt a peculiar sensation.

‘Would you like to come over here?’

It was just a thought, not even a murmur, that didn’t reach anyone else.

It wasn’t conveyed to others, not even through the Necklace of Confession.

“Huh?”

That’s how it should have been.

Professor Liana blinked. Her gaze fixed on her palm.

She could see her palm. The spirit floating above it was gone.

Blinking, she lifted her head. Her gaze followed, looking at the spirit's new location.

'……'

The sensation of the wind felt distinctly on my palm.

"Huh?"

The spirit had moved to my palm.

Professor Liana's mouth opened.

???

Multiple question marks floated above her head.

'?'

Question marks floated above my head, too.

[What]

The monotonous voice from the Necklace of Confession followed belatedly.

CHAPTER 98
SPIRITS (3)

In the original series, there weren't many instances where spirits were utilized. There were plenty of means to become stronger without relying on spirits.

Even in those few instances, Spirit Magic was never the primary method used.

In the first iteration, I dabbled in various things and only used Spirit Magic as a supplementary tool. In any case, the first iteration was a jack-of-all-trades character who never really mastered anything, be it martial arts or magic.

In the fifth iteration, "Inverse Magic," I rewired my internal circuits with magical formulas, using the backlash from twisting them as output.

It was a mediocre magician route, and due to requiring a lot of mana, I had to supplement it by consuming spirits.

Despite that, I was extremely short on mana and eventually exploded because I couldn't control the backlash, similar to the third iteration.

In the sixth iteration, "Dark Necromancer," I followed a typical necromancer route.

Mainly using black magic and necromancy, I managed a large legion.

Because of the nature of my abilities, my favorability was at rock bottom, but unlike the later iterations where I went overboard, I somehow fought on the side of humanity.

I did dabble with dark spirits in the process, but I didn't delve deeply.

Even when I touched on dark spirits, I didn't gain much, and I couldn't develop a high affinity.

Raising corpses of humans and monsters lying around and operating the spirits was more efficient.

In the sixth iteration, I fought bravely, matching the legion pouring out of The Tower of Necromancy with my own, but I was torn apart by the Lord of The Tower of Purgatory who intervened.

Besides these, the only other iteration that touched on spirits was the twelfth iteration with a hybrid summoner… but I didn't delve deeply into that either.

Like the fifth iteration, I only used spirits as materials or as emergency projectiles.

In short, I never used Spirit Magic as a primary method in any iteration, nor did I delve deeply into it.

However, I fought against spirit magicians in various routes, so I have basic knowledge.

To handle spirits, a connection through a contract is necessary.

For the magician's will to be conveyed and for the spirit to operate according to that will, the magician and spirit must be connected.

Hence, the process of 'contracting' between the magician and the spirit is essential. Without a contract, it's impossible to handle spirits.

That was the knowledge from the original series, and it aligned with the common sense I learned in this world.

I also thought so until just now.

[What is this]

That common sense was slightly shaken.

I couldn't understand the current situation well.

I used the power of observation to grasp my surroundings.

Professor Liana, who was sitting neatly near me.

She usually had a neat and gentle impression, but now she had a dumbfounded expression I had never seen before.

Her mouth was so wide open that I worried her hair might get in.

I observed more of my surroundings.

The cadets, holding their crystal orbs and training, also had blank expressions.

Hong Yeon-hwa looked dazed, and Baek Ahrin and Elia were wide-eyed with astonishment.

Their gazes were all fixed on me.

The colorful lights of the spirits swirled around me.

The spirits that had emerged from the space Professor Liana had opened earlier.

The colorful spirits mingled with the surroundings, creating a mysterious atmosphere, but I didn't have the leisure to appreciate it.

My already messy mind became even more complicated.

I raised my right hand, gathering my thoughts.

It was the same as before. Just a thought, without any verbal or necklace assistance.

– Whoosh!

As if understanding my thought, one of the light clusters swiftly flew and settled on the back of my hand.

A red light cluster. I could tell it was a fire spirit from the warmth emanating from it.

[Warm]

[Firefly]

[Heat]

Despite being a fire spirit, the warmth felt on the back of my hand was very gentle.

There wasn't even a speck of hostility. I didn't feel at all that it would harm me.

It was an instinctive thought.

I couldn't be harmed by it. If I wanted to be, I could be, but if I didn't, they wouldn't harm me.

Conversely,

If I wanted, they would comply with my wishes. If I asked, they would move according to my will.

'What… '

As I thought for a moment, the light clusters hovering around approached closer.

The spirits' energies drew near, adding to the familiarity.

– Thump

My heart pounded. The sound of the heartbeat spread throughout my body. It collided with my outer walls and reverberated again inside.

My focus shifted from the external to the internal.

The awareness of my surroundings grew faint. The scenery around me blurred.

Instead, I felt the internal presence vividly.

It wasn't entirely an unfamiliar sensation. It was a feeling I had experienced, albeit a while ago.

It was similar to the sensation I felt when I was on the brink of death, overwhelmed by a monster.

Though I wasn't on the verge of death now, I perceived myself more clearly, similar to then.

Among the elements that made me, two stood out prominently.

The [Versatile Ability] and [Mana Affinity].

Nearby, two more elements, not fully recognized, existed.

External forces that weren't mine. The powers of space and observation.

These four were the main entities.

They weren't all.

Beneath them lay countless unique qualities, too innumerable to comprehend, all unrecognizable.

– Humm…

Among the countless small unique qualities, one stood out.

Its presence gradually grew. It increasingly occupied a share of my essence.

It wasn't yet fully interpretable.

But it grew enough to stand out from the surrounding qualities.

One day, it would grow to a comprehensible size.

As I realized this, my awareness returned to normal.

The lawn covered in faint mist. The clear lake without a ripple.

The external scenery returned.

The spirits that had been circling around me had vanished.

It seemed Professor Liana somehow managed to retrieve them.

I absentmindedly waved my hand. The warmth that had been there was now gone, leaving a sense of emptiness.

"What was that just now?"

As I sat there, dazed, Professor Liana, looking equally confused, asked.

I thought for a moment and shook my head.

[I don't know]

I had nothing more to say.

.

.

.

The first session of the 'Understanding Spirits' lecture ended inconclusively.

Thanks to the grand spectacle I caused.

Despite Professor Liana's efforts, we didn't manage to grasp anything significant during the lecture.

At best, I had managed to handle spirits without a contract.

Though Professor Liana could regain control if she exerted her authority.

But the fact remained that I had handled spirits without a contract.

It was still an astonishing feat. I suspected more rumors about me would surface soon.

"Let's take our time figuring this out."

I knew little about spirits, and even the expert, Professor Liana, didn't know about such cases.

Ultimately, the solution was to dig deeper through Professor Liana's lectures.

Professor Liana seemed to have an inkling of what was going on but didn't share it with me for some reason.

Feeling curious but thinking she must have her reasons, I nodded quietly.

Still, I couldn't help feeling uneasy.

There was a chance to uncover secrets about my unique abilities and their origins, but now another mystery had surfaced.

Would I ever unravel all the questions I had about myself?

I sighed involuntarily.

Regardless of the outcome, the lecture ended.

I planned to have lunch with Hong Yeon-hwa, but she blushed and ran away as soon as she saw me.

I was left with the immense shock of being abandoned by Hong Yeon-hwa.

I had to settle for eating a nutrition bar alone, feeling lonely…

'Hmm… '

And so, I faced the major lecture time.

Arriving at my destination with a slow pace, I felt a strange sensation.

The feedback from the soil as I tapped it with my toes.

Dragging my feet on the ground, dust mixed with sand rose up.

An old-fashioned training ground, rare in Shio-ram, which was filled with the latest technology.

It felt like just yesterday when Professor Atra beat me to the ground here, but it had actually been almost a month.

I had felt this strange sensation since this morning.

I thought I would die there, but here I was, alive and well, attending classes, feeling deeply moved.

'Phew… '

Fortunately, Professor Atra returned to Shio-ram just before the weekend ended.

In other words, there was no problem conducting the major lecture.

'I wonder how today will be.'

During many sparring sessions, I often lost consciousness.

Now, I was actually hoping for that.

Judging by the deep shadows under my eyes, it was clear I wasn't in good shape.

I hadn't slept over the weekend.

Several reasons contributed to that… some embarrassing, others due to new forms of nightmares that naturally crept into my sleep.

I planned to use Professor Atra's harsh training to faint.

Maybe I hadn't been able to sleep because I hadn't pushed my body to the limit over the weekend.

After being thrashed to my limits, I'd probably pass out and sleep naturally.

Shortly after, Professor Atra arrived, and after a thorough check-up, we began sparring as a warm-up.

My skills had improved drastically. Experiencing real combat and walking the edge of life and death had made me grow in ways I couldn't have imagined before.

But I still couldn't match Professor Atra.

As my skill level gradually increased, my body couldn't keep up, and eventually, Professor Atra's fist slipped through my defense.

'!'

A fist imbued with golden Qi flew towards me.

I couldn't dodge it.

I was already in a defensive position. I barely avoided the previous attacks by twisting my body.

Because of that, I couldn't avoid the current blow.

I bit my teeth and braced myself. I expanded my Qi to prepare for the attack.

And then…

'?'

Professor Atra's fist stopped right in front of my nose.

Bang! The wind, slower than the fist, slammed into my face.

My hair fluttered in the wind.

I stood still.

I had expected to be hit and roll away, but that didn't happen.

Wondering what was going on, I stood still as Professor Atra's trembling fist hovered in front of me.

"Ugh…"

Professor Atra bit her lip. A sound filled with anguish and hesitation leaked from between her lips.

Her eyes couldn't stay still. Her shaking pupils stared intently at my face.

Finally, as if she couldn't bear it, Professor Atra closed her eyes tightly and took a few steps back, withdrawing her fist.

'?'

What's going on with her?

* * *

[Player Adjustment System: Measurement]

▸Stats

…

▸Unique Abilities

…

▸Mental State

…

[Confusion?] : ?

[?Emotion] : ?

…

[Incomplete] : Split and not whole.

[Energy Depleted] : Vitality is consumed and empty.

[Affection Deprived] : Extremely thirsty for affection. The degree is very severe.

[Fatigue] : Mind or body is tired and exhausted.

[Loneliness] : Feeling solitude and a sense of isolation.

…

CHAPTER 99
MASTER (1)

There were quite a few scoundrels who dared to escape from the Shipnaha incident.

These wretched beings, greedy like pigs and dogs, had caused the whole mess but then fled, unable to clean up the chaos they had created.

Some fled to other countries as soon as the incident broke out, and some went into hiding in remote areas, where few people would find them.

I personally went after them.

Partly because I wanted to beat them to death with my own hands, and partly because I didn't want to risk letting any of them escape.

The mere thought of any one of them escaping and living arrogantly somewhere else made my teeth grind.

I couldn't bear the thought of such a scenario.

So, I cooperated with the association and personally tracked them down.

I also wanted to return to Shio-ram as soon as possible.

Leaving Lee Hayul alone made me anxious.

He was the type of kid who seemed likely to get into trouble if left alone.

That was how I felt emotionally.

Logically, I was sure he would be safe inside Shio-ram.

There's the Principal, who hasn't shown his face in decades but is still there. There's also the Vice-Principal, who rarely leaves Shio-ram, and other defensive heroes and facilities.

So I kept telling myself it would be fine and moved diligently.

In fact, I didn't expect to handle everything by the weekend. Even if there were fewer escapees, there were still dozens, and they were scattered like insects.

Even with the use of gates to move around, it was difficult to catch them all in less than two days.

Still, I planned to finish as quickly as possible and get back to Shio-ram.

I moved as fast as I could.

"…All 23 targets, including Derez Blair, have been apprehended."

And I caught them all over the weekend.

As the sun rose on Monday. Barely, but I caught all those cockroaches.

"……"

After finishing my thoughts, I looked around.

Inside the underground shelter, which looked like it had money poured into it, the association's personnel were busily searching for criminal evidence and such.

The person on the association's list had already been beaten and taken away. I'd made them a cripple and ensured they were treated just enough to survive before they would face their sentence.

That was a good thing.

I finished faster than expected. None of them escaped.

Now, I could start Lee Hayul's major lecture as soon as it was a weekday.

'…I don't know.'

The result was good, but I couldn't be entirely happy.

I had been running around without rest over the weekend. I did put in the effort.

But even so, I couldn't have finished this quickly.

Even though I am strong, I am just one person with two hands, and even with the association's personnel, it was impossible to search the entire world right away.

"This concludes the apprehension. Thanks to your assistance, Ms. Clyde, we could proceed smoothly."

"Spare me the formalities."

"If I skip the formalities, I might get criticized for my attitude later. That would affect my job performance review."

An android approached the dazed Atra.

It was Maxwell, the eccentric who insisted on wearing a neat suit even at a crime scene like this.

After organizing the site details on a hologram projected from his smartwatch, he spoke.

"As mentioned, all criminals on the tracking list have been apprehended. I'll send any additional details as they get processed."

"Yeah, good job."

I looked at Maxwell, who was reporting through the hologram, with a complicated gaze.

Maxwell.

He's a superhuman belonging to the Disaster Management Department of the association, responsible for preventing and handling incidents caused by dungeons and managing the damage.

I don't know his exact position within the department or what tasks he handles.

But I know he receives direct orders from the council members or the association's head.

When I met Maxwell on the frontlines, he was acting on the council members' orders.

During the time he requested my cooperation internally, Maxwell was also following the council members' orders.

– When you say higher-ups, do you mean the council members?

– No. Higher than that.

Now, he's acting on orders from even higher-ups.

Keeping this in mind, I observed the association's personnel moving busily.

The Shipnaha incident… or the so-called disaster, was a massive accident. Naturally, a lot of manpower was mobilized to track down the main culprits.

…Even considering that, the effort put into tracking the main culprits was extraordinary.

Just looking at the observation magical tools in some people's hands showed that.

The number of personnel mobilized was significant, and their quality was decent. Moreover, the observation magical tools used were numerous and of higher performance than standard.

Considering the information received beforehand and catching the main culprits directly, I realized that even with half the current manpower, it wouldn't have been a problem.

It would have actually made things easier.

Given the recent global dungeon disturbances and the workload piling up, complaining about a lack of manpower seemed excessive.

"Ah, if it's not too much trouble, could you pass a message to Lee Hayul?"

"Speak."

"There are matters regarding compensation and communication about the recent

accident. If he could contact the association at his convenience, we will visit him."

"I heard the same when he was discharged."

"Ah, that new recruit handled it well. Makes the bosses look good for no reason."

Lee Hayul had made significant contributions during the Shipnaha incident.

He saved countless people by running tirelessly from the start of the incident, and he single-handedly took down the Alpha being, breaking the dungeon's outer wall and allowing the rescue team to enter easily.

Though the incident was caused by the dirty and ugly connections of that region, the association, which maintains global order, also bears some responsibility. To keep up appearances, they had to reward Lee Hayul appropriately.

…I get that, but their attitude was odd.

Usually, they would have visited the recovery room to take his statement once he regained consciousness, but instead, they processed his discharge procedures themselves.

They just left, saying to contact them when available, and even now, they tell me to inform him to contact them so they can visit.

Their attitude was careful, treating him like a very precious person.

They put excessive effort into capturing the fugitives.

They didn't leak any problematic information to the media, and any nonsense that emerged was swiftly and strongly dealt with by the law.

The reason was… because Maxwell and the association were acting on orders from the association's heads.

The heads. Or the heads of the association.

The orders came directly from the Lords of The Tower of Space and The Tower of Harmony.

‘……’

I didn’t know much about Lee Hayul.

I knew his basic personal information, but I didn’t look further, not wanting to get emotionally involved.

So, I couldn’t fully grasp the current situation.

It was clear that as a special admission student, he was protected by the Lord of The Tower of Growth.

Now, I realized that he was also receiving peculiar treatment from the Lords of The Tower of Space and The Tower of Harmony.

I didn’t know why.

Moreover, I knew far too little about Lee Hayul.

I didn’t know why he was protected by the tower lords.

I hadn’t heard why he didn’t run but instead saved people during the incident.

I didn’t know why he suffered from nightmares every time he slept.

Mostly because I didn’t want to know and didn’t ask about Lee Hayul.

“…Tsk.”

I bit my lip.

Unwarranted thoughts crossed my mind, which I tried to shake off as I turned around.

It was time to return to Shio-ram.

* * *

I arrived at Shio-ram just as dawn broke on Monday.

I barely made it in time.

I sighed in relief and headed toward my residence.

Since it was early morning, long past sunset, most people would be asleep.

Lee Hayul would be no exception. He must be lying in bed, sleeping by now.

"……"

Imagining that scene made me feel oddly displeased.

I found it annoying to think he was sleeping comfortably in bed, not in my arms.

Realizing my thoughts, I shook my head vigorously.

'I must be more tired than I thought… '

How tired must I be to entertain such ridiculous thoughts?

I decided to get some sleep, even if it was just a short nap.

I quickened my pace.

.

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The next day arrived.

It was time for the major lecture after lunch.

As always, the lecture began with sparring.

Today was no different.

I first checked Lee Hayul's physical condition and asked how he was doing.

To my surprise, Lee Hayul was wearing some artifact around his neck.

I heard it was an artifact with emotional expression and imprinting functions.

I was looking for a similar artifact, so it saved me the trouble of finding one.

[Yes, I got it as a gift from Elia.]

"…A gift?"

…I felt weird about it but decided to let it go.

Other topics could wait, and we began sparring as a warm-up.

We sparred even when Lee Hayul's physique was weaker than an average person's, and we continued to do so now that he had grown significantly.

The sparring was unarmed, just bare-handed.

In it, I could feel Lee Hayul's astonishing growth.

His physical abilities and mana growth were remarkable, but even more surprising was his skill.

Every move I made was countered. Even when I introduced variables to create confusion, he handled them all.

Battles he struggled with in the past were now handled effortlessly.

Attacks that would have landed before were now deflected without fail.

It was as if his ability to analyze fights had reached a new level. His movements evolved accordingly.

And this was just close combat. I knew Lee Hayul's abilities extended beyond mere hand-to-hand combat.

He wasn't using his magic or the artifact attached to his back.

And there was his unique ability, rumored to be some kind of copying ability,

unknown to the outside world.

He had many hidden cards. Even his current movements weren't his full power.

As always, I increased the difficulty level.

'……'

In the process, I felt uneasy.

That was an understatement.

I felt deeply troubled.

…Blocking and deflecting attacks.

In the process, I could see Lee Hayul's subtly twisting expressions in great detail, thanks to my trained eyes.

My body felt like it was going to seize up. It was suffocating, as if something was pressing down hard on my chest.

Eventually, a moment came when Lee Hayul's defense opened up.

I attacked through that gap. My fist, wrapped in Qi, pierced through the opening.

A fist cutting through the air, rushing in.

It would hit.

My experience and intuition told me.

It would hit.

My attack.

On Lee Hayul.

My fist would slam into his face. He would grimace in pain. Blood would flow.

Shipnaha, the path to the underground shelter, the pool of blood…

The corpses.

"……!!"

Bang! A gust of wind roared. Dust scattered from the ground, and my hair fluttered wildly.

The arm I had punched with stopped awkwardly in mid-air.

My trembling fist remained suspended.

Lee Hayul's face showed bewilderment, not understanding why I had stopped.

My arm was shaking. I couldn't believe it.

The trembling dispersed my strength. Even if I threw my fist now, it wouldn't hold half its original power.

Shaking during an attack. It was a habit I'd consciously corrected before graduating from the academy.

Now?

I couldn't stop trembling.

"…Sorry. Let's continue."

I spoke, trying to control my shaking voice.

Lee Hayul hesitated for a moment, then composed himself and took his stance.

We resumed sparring.

I gritted my teeth.

It was ridiculous. I had done well so far. I was confident this was the fastest and surest way for him to grow.

“Mo…”

There was nothing wrong with Lee Hayul being strong. The sweat and a bit of blood now were nothing.

If he didn’t shed them now, he would have to shed his life and future in the face of real danger later.

“Can’t…”

During the incident, Lee Hayul faced threats. If he had been a little weaker or less fortunate, he would have died.

“Can’t do this…”

There were many opportunities to land a clear hit during sparring.

I never landed a single one.

Unable to control my trembling voice, I hugged Lee Hayul tightly.

[?]

[Safe]

[Warm]

[Soft]

[Comfortable]

[Like it]

Lee Hayul, suddenly hugged, opened his mouth in surprise.

It was a familiar embrace. The soft and warm embrace he had been accustomed to recently.

Like a habit, he nestled into Atra’s arms.

The feathers of the sky fluttered behind him.

CHAPTER 100
MASTER (2)

In the corner of the old training ground, a tree was growing.

I didn't know the exact species, but its roots were firmly planted, and its green leaves were quite vibrant, indicating it was a healthy tree.

The leaves were quite lush, providing a wide area of shade. It was a good place to take refuge under on a sunny day.

Moreover, since the area was open on all sides, cool breezes often blew through, making it an ideal spot to cool down a heated body.

After the major lecture ended, dragging my exhausted body to collapse in the shade brought a considerable amount of comfort.

Currently, Professor Atra was leaning against that tree.

And I was nestled in her arms.

'?'

I didn't quite understand. When I came to my senses, I was being held and cradled in Professor Atra's arms.

I dazedly mumbled something, then used the power of observation to take a closer look at Professor Atra.

She was holding me on her lap as if I were something precious, with her arms wrapped around my waist, pulling me close. Given the size difference, my face naturally ended up buried in her chest.

It was an extremely embarrassing position, but Professor Atra didn't seem to mind at all and was simply stroking my head.

As I indulged in the caress, I recalled the situation from a moment ago.

I had known for a while that something was off with Professor Atra today.

Her expression hadn't been good since we arrived at the old training ground.

Of course, it was hard to tell because she always had a stern and cold expression, but the vibe she was giving off was unmistakably different.

Even without sensing the mood, I could tell from her expression, possibly because I had spent quite a bit of time with her.

After checking my physical condition, her mood worsened as we began sparring.

I was worried and asked her, but Professor Atra brushed it off with a perfunctory "I'm fine."

Since we were in the middle of sparring, I planned to ask her properly once the lecture ended.

With that thought in mind, we continued sparring.

Then, suddenly, Professor Atra stopped the sparring and hugged me tightly. She then sat under the tree and pulled me even closer.

'Why is she doing this?'

My question remained unanswered. I had known something was odd today, but I didn't understand why she was acting this way.

As I pondered, Professor Atra exhaled a shaky breath and pressed my head down.

My head was buried deep into her ample chest.

The soft texture of her skin rubbed against my face, and the warmth from her thin shirt directly transmitted, heating my face.

Yet, breathing was relatively easy. Even while hugging me tightly, Professor Atra adjusted her position so I wouldn't suffocate.

'…Ugh'

It was an embarrassing position.

The sensation of our bellies touching was embarrassing, and the softness pressing against my face made it flush.

And…

[Happy]

[Comfortable]

[Sense of Security]

It was an incredibly cozy and comfortable position.

More than the embarrassment, I felt an inexplicable sense of security.

It was also a familiar position.

From almost three weeks ago until a few days ago, I had spent time with Professor Atra in the recovery room.

During that period, I was mentally unstable and instinctively craved human touch and warmth, which Professor Atra provided.

I was almost always in her arms.

My face was always buried in her chest, and she always patted my head.

Whenever phantom pain from my missing left arm disrupted my breathing, her warm hand would pat my back.

This happened almost daily. Professor Atra embraced me without any sign of annoyance.

Now, being nestled in her arms like this felt more "familiar" than "embarrassing."

However, that didn't mean I wasn't embarrassed. Even now, with my mind healed, I

still felt embarrassed.

Moreover, the situation was peculiar. She seemed off all day, then suddenly hugged me tightly in the middle of sparring.

I tried to free myself. I attempted to nudge Professor Atra, gesturing for her to let me go, and tried to use the confession necklace to voice my plea.

– Pat, pat…

…I couldn't move.

It wasn't just my personal desire to stay in her arms; it was the sorrowful look in Professor Atra's eyes as she gazed down at me.

It was an emotion that didn't match her usual cold demeanor.

So I stayed quietly in her embrace, if only for a moment.

But that moment had reached its limit.

[Sleepy]

[Like it]

[Happy]

The soft sensation enveloping my entire body and the human warmth, coupled with the hand patting my back and head, made my consciousness gradually fade.

I was already drowsy, and being held by Professor Atra made me feel like I could fall asleep immediately.

Of course, I wanted to bury my face in her chest and sleep like this, but I had to understand the reason behind her sorrowful emotions first.

I patted Professor Atra's back with one hand.

[Please let go]

[Keep hugging me]

[No]

"…Are you asking to be held or to be let go?"

Professor Atra seemed bewildered by the contradictory messages but reluctantly loosened her grip on my back and head.

I pulled my face free from her chest.

– Whoosh…

[Cold]

The cool air hitting my face made my body shiver involuntarily.

Suppressing the desire to bury my face back in her warm embrace, I looked up.

I couldn't see her eyes, but my gesture showed that I was ready to talk.

I focused on the confession necklace. Fortunately, it was working properly, handling even long sentences smoothly.

[Did something happen over the weekend?]

"No, everything went smoothly."

[Then why did you act like that earlier?]

Earlier. Both Professor Atra and I knew what that referred to.

The anxiety and hesitation throughout the sparring, and eventually hugging me tightly.

A look of anguish crossed Professor Atra's face.

She tightened her grip on my waist.

She held me close like before, but I didn't urge her further.

I could see the turmoil and complexity in her eyes.

“A few years ago… I took in a disciple.”

Her tightly closed lips opened after a moment of silence.

“Back then, I was… inexperienced in many ways. I wasn’t as strong as I am now, it was my first time teaching, and I had no aptitude for it.”

Professor Atra had a disciple once. It was news to me, but I listened patiently as she continued.

“I was clumsy at teaching. I couldn’t properly point out my disciple’s flaws, and the little I did was inadequate. And I couldn’t commit myself fully, so I taught clumsily.”

I blinked at her words.

It didn’t match the Professor Atra I knew now.

Throughout the lecture, she precisely identified my shortcomings and showed me how to overcome them.

She couldn’t commit fully and taught clumsily? Despite that, I learned by being beaten during the sparring.

I felt a sense of confusion.

“Time passed, and that disciple entered a dungeon and died in a rampage.”

Her next explanation made things clearer. I could infer the rest without further details.

“It was just a level 4 dungeon rampage. Though not enough to handle the situation, it shouldn’t have been enough to die so meaninglessly.”

She had a disciple.

But not anymore.

“But they died. They vanished like a lie, leaving only a single torn arm. I dug through

the remains to find any trace, but… there was nothing."

She tightened her grip. I was pulled closer, my face buried in her chest. I tilted my head up.

"Of course… I regretted it."

Her eyes were filled with gloom, pain, and regret.

She seemed to be looking at something that wasn't there now.

"I should have arrived sooner. I shouldn't have been late. If I had arrived on time, they wouldn't have died so meaninglessly. I should have taught them better, so they wouldn't have died."

If only.

If she had arrived sooner.

Even if she wasn't strong enough to break through the outer walls, if she had somehow helped.

If she had taught better.

Maybe they would have survived. If instead of indulging their whims and wasting time, she had given proper guidance, it might not have ended that way.

"…The regret came too late. They were already dead, and I couldn't undo it."

Professor Atra's eyes darkened. Her gaze shifted. Now, only I was reflected in her eyes.

"That's why I demanded such harsh training from you."

There was a newfound emotion in her eyes—guilt.

"I forced you to undergo rigorous training for my personal reasons and, wanting to avoid feeling loss again, treated you coldly."

And then I got caught in a dungeon rampage.

Like her previous disciple.

I finally understood why Atra was overreacting.

She was facing a situation identical to a past, unhealed scar.

"…I'm sorry. It's all my fault."

Her arm around my waist trembled, as if afraid I would disappear any moment.

Atra's explanation was fragmented and had many gaps.

But I got the gist of it.

I pondered for a moment.

What should I say? How should I respond?

After a brief consideration, I found a small answer.

I focused on the confession necklace, making sure not to stutter.

[The training was very hard]

Professor Atra's body trembled at my opening statement.

[It hurt from the first day when you beat me with a wooden sword, and it kept hurting because you kept hitting me]

Flinch—Professor Atra's body jolted repeatedly.

[I knew you were a good person, but it still hurt when you treated me coldly every day.]

"Ugh…"

Professor Atra winced with each word as if a knife was being driven into her chest.

I paused my voice for a moment. I organized my thoughts for what I really wanted to say.

Words I should have said a long time ago.

[If not for your teaching, I would have surely died]

Her face tensed up, filled with fear and regret.

[Even if I hadn't tried to save others, I would have died without your guidance]

[And I wouldn't have been able to save others]

[And I wouldn't be here, in your arms]

Not just because of the incident at Shipnaha, but even before, these were words I should have said.

[Thanks to you, I survived]

[Thank you]

I should have expressed my gratitude earlier, but I was late.

Conveying it now made me feel awkward, and Professor Atra's overwhelmed expression amplified the feeling.

To hide my reddened face, I buried it in her chest.

…Even doing so didn't completely hide my burning ears.

I carefully maneuvered the wings of the sky to cover my ears, and the arm around my waist pulled me tighter.

– Oof?

My breath caught. Her grip hadn't been this tight before.

As if unable to control her overflowing emotions, Professor Atra hugged me tightly.

My face was buried deep in her ample chest.

.

.

“I am a flawed person.”

After a while, Professor Atra, who had calmed her emotions, spoke.

I, having narrowly avoided suffocation, caught my breath and tilted my head.

My expression, tinged with a hint of annoyance at the thought that she still had more to say, made Professor Atra avert her gaze slightly.

“As a mentor, I am lacking in many ways. I have no aptitude or desire to teach anyone.”

My annoyed expression deepened.

Professor Atra continued, glancing nervously at my reaction.

“I am a flawed individual, but… I still want to teach you everything I know.”

This time, my expression changed.

With an unusual look of anxiety, Professor Atra stroked my head and asked.

“Will you consider someone like me… as your master?”

I thought for a brief moment.

Then I smiled.

[Yes]

[Master]

.

.

[Sleepy]

[Please pat me]

* * *

[Player Adjustment System: Favorability]

Lee Hayul → Atra Clyde

●●●●●●●●○○ (79▷80/100)

[Master] [Expectation] [Sense of Security] [Yearning for Affection]

…

●●●●●●●●○○ (80▷81/100)

…

●●●●●●●●○○ (81▷82/100)

…

[Conditions to lift the [Curse of Silence] have not been met]

[Conditions to lift the [Curse of Loneliness] have not been met]

…

[Player Adjustment System: Measurement]

▸Mental State

…

[Fatigue] : Mind or body is tired and exhausted.

[Attention Seeker] : Seeks to be loved or make someone happy.

[Fulfillment] : Filled with a sense of purpose.

...

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